



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



THURSDAY — 13 JAN 2022

	International	National	Regional and Local
Events, Opportunities Go to articles	01/13 Australia runaway omicron outbreak 01/13 Omicron peaks in UK; hope wave recedes 01/13 France: teachers strike; protest protocols 01/13 US: 'unlawful' China maritime claims 01/13 Russia deploy army to Cuba, Venezuela? 01/13 Russia: Ukraine crisis talks at 'dead end' 01/13 Report: regimes face significant backlash 01/12 WHO: omicron cases 'off the charts' 01/12 Germany: record number Covid cases 01/12 Omicron dims South America optimism 01/12 Omicron tests China 'zero-Covid' strategy 01/12 WHO warns: omicron still dangerous virus 01/12 Switzerland cuts quarantine, isolation times 01/12 France: despite surge 'not changing course' 01/12 France faces huge education strike 01/12 Iran re-imprisons French academic 01/12 US, Iran inch closer to nuclear pact? 01/12 Fears of Russia invasion Ukraine rise 01/12 NATO rejects Russia guarantee demands 01/12 Rubble brings opportunity, risk Gaza Strip 01/12 US designates NKorea officials w/sanctions	01/13 Omicron surge slowing East Coast cities? 01/13 Jobless claims rise; highest since mid-Nov. 01/13 Delta: 8,000 employees Covid positive 01/12 Free virus tests to schools to stay open 01/12 Omicron surge cause rise in severely ill? 01/12 Omicron so contagious 'most will get it' 01/12 Cruise crews isolate on quarantine ships 01/12 Parents of youngest kids wait for vaccine 01/12 FDA warns: stop using LuSys brand tests 01/12 Calif. asymptomatic healthcare staff at work 01/12 Paying more range of necessities 01/12 Inflation today different than 1982 01/12 Inflation: consumer prices jump 7% 01/12 Study: lower income groups, air pollution 01/12 Georgia: guaranteed income Black women 01/12 Housing costs jump: prices, rents push up 01/12 Soaring tax revenue constrain govt. deficit 01/12 IRS tax season start: 10M returns in backlog 01/12 Army ups enlistment bonus to \$50,000 01/12 Army relieves 6 active-duty commanders 01/12 DOJ: no compensation separated families 01/12 Industry: oil-gas crackdown drives up price 01/12 Midwest faces winter storm; Northeast cold 01/12 Federal govt. deregulates 'French dressing' 01/12 Students question value of college degrees 01/11 Gene found in Georgia water global threat?	01/12 DOH: 1,009,187 cases, 10,103 deaths 01/12 Seattle mayor names new directors 01/12 Seattle extends eviction moratorium 01/12 Calif. strike delays local trash pickup 01/12 Pierce Co. shortage of 911 dispatchers 01/12 More Seattle-area schools return to online 01/12 Protesters rally on Board of Health meeting 01/12 Email: Seattle officials fell for SPD ruse too 01/12 Mayor: 'unacceptable' SPD engaged in ruse 01/12 Officer in SPD 'coordinating lying' is rehired 01/12 Oregon deploys National Guard to hospitals 01/12 Kent PD chief meets w/public: Nazi insignia 01/12 Kittitas Co. criticizes WSDOT refusal
Cyber Awareness Go to articles	01/13 Hacking groups focus on finance industry 01/12 Nigeria lifts ban on Twitter after 7mo. 01/12 TellYouThePass ransomware returns 01/12 OceanLotus hackers use web archive files 01/12 Kazakhstan chaos, crypto miners at a loss 01/12 Journalists El Salvador targeted w/spyware	01/12 BioPlus faces lawsuit after network hack 01/12 Cyber Command: MuddyWater Iranian intel 01/12 Public cloud infrastructure to spread RATs 01/12 TransCredit exposed financial data records 01/12 Windows RDP bug opens users to data theft	
Terror Conditions Go to articles	01/13 Pakistan Taliban vow to avenge killing	01/12 US-France counterterrorism cooperation 01/12 DOJ new domestic terrorism unit	
Suspicious, Unusual Go to articles	01/13 Virus tracing app to scout crime witnesses 01/12 Severe South America heat wave	01/13 More US diplomats 'Havana Syndrome'? 01/12 Cannabis can prevent Covid infection? 01/12 Army: series of soldier deaths in Alaska 01/12 Winter fastest-warming season in most US	01/12 Covid testing sites under probe; fake tests? 01/12 Critical blood shortage less than day supply
Crime, Criminals Go to articles	01/13 German court convicts Syrian for torture 01/12 Europe prisons push back against Covid 01/12 Suspect held; 2012 slayings in French Alps	01/12 Lawsuit against Prince Andrew upheld 01/12 Virginia Beach police forged documents 01/12 Fatal police shootings dip in 2021; trend? 01/12 Charge: banned substances to Olympians 01/12 Waukesha parade suspect 71 new charges	01/12 KCSO: 2 arrests after crime spree 01/12 King Co. criminal trials suspended 4 weeks 01/12 WA wildlife manager accused of poaching 01/12 Oregon alarm at rise of illegal pot farms

[DISCLAIMER and FAIR USE Notice](#)

Events, Opportunities

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	01/13 Jobless claims rise; highest since mid-Nov.
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/u-s-jobless-claims-rise-by-23000-to-230000/
GIST	WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits rose last week to the highest level since mid-November.

U.S. jobless claims climbed by 23,000 last week to 230,000, still low by historic standards. The four-week moving average, which smooths out week-to-week blips, was up nearly 6,300 to almost 211,00.

The weekly applications, a proxy for layoffs, have now risen four of the last five weeks, possibly a sign that the omicron variant is having an impact on the job market, which has bounced strongly from last year's coronavirus recession.

Altogether, 1.6 million people were collecting jobless aid the week that ended Jan. 1.

Companies are holding onto workers at a time when it's difficult to find replacements. Employers posted 10.6 million job openings in November, the fifth-highest monthly total in records going back to 2000. A record 4.5 million workers quit their jobs in November — a sign that they are confident enough to look something better.

The job market has bounced back from last year's brief but intense coronavirus recession. When COVID hit, governments ordered lockdowns, consumers hunkered down at home and many businesses closed or cut back hours. Employers slashed millions of jobs in March and April 2020, and the unemployment rate rocketed to 14.7%.

But massive government spending — and eventually the rollout of vaccines — brought the economy back. Last year, employers added a record 6.4 million jobs — but that still was not enough to make up for the unprecedented 9.4 million jobs lost in 2020. And hiring slowed in November and December last year as employers struggled to fill job openings.

Still, the unemployment rate fell last month to a pandemic low 3.9%.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 FDA warns: stop using LuSys brand tests
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/fda-lusys-covid-antigen-antibody-test-warning/507-1c08a850-21f0-43f0-8b97-87f9cbfc5df8
GIST	<p>The Food and Drug Administration is warning people and laboratories to stop using a specific brand of COVID-19 antigen and antibody tests. It said the tests haven't been authorized and present a "high risk of false results."</p> <p>The tests are the LuSys Laboratories COVID-19 Antigen Test (Nasal/Saliva) and the LuSys Laboratories COVID-19 IgG/IgM Antibody Test. The FDA said they may be sold under the company names Luscent Diagnostics or Viverra Pharmaceuticals or with the trade name EagleDx.</p> <p>"Neither test has been authorized, cleared, or approved by the FDA for distribution or use in the United States," the FDA said in a statement Tuesday.</p> <p>It's believed the tests were distributed both for at-home and laboratory testing.</p> <p>A false negative on an antigen test may tell a person they do not have COVID-19 when they actually do have it, the FDA said. A false positive would mean the person would be told they have COVID-19 but really don't.</p> <p>A false negative on an antibody test would mean the person is told they don't have antibodies to the coronavirus but actually do have them. A false positive means the opposite -- the test says they do have the antibodies but really don't.</p> <p>People and caregivers who have used the tests are urged by the FDA to talk to health care providers if they think they were tested with the LuSys tests and are concerned about the results. Health care providers who used the tests recently are asked to consider retesting their patients with a different brand.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Calif. strike delays local trash pickup
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/strike-further-delays-trash-pickup-after-a-nearly-a-month-of-no-collection/281-bb282c3a-8814-440c-b0b3-b715b4c6f0ab
GIST	<p>RENTON, Wash. — Scheduled trash service cross Puget Sound was disrupted Wednesday after local workers with a disposal company paused work to support a worker strike happening within the same company in California.</p> <p>Hundreds of Seattle area-based workers with Republic Services participated in a work stoppage to support the strike happening in San Diego, according to the labor union's web page.</p> <p>"Sanitation workers on strike at Republic Services in San Diego extended their picket line to four Republic facilities in Seattle, Bellevue, Lynnwood and Kent, Washington today. Over 300 Teamsters who work at these trash and recycling facilities are refusing to cross the picket line," the post from Teamsters says.</p> <p>Teamsters workers in San Diego are asking for the company to address concerns over "excessive overtime, pandemic safety, and harassment by managers," according to the post.</p> <p>For many residents in Washington, the delay in pickup on Wednesday meant trash has not been collected since mid-December, due to previous delays from winter weather.</p> <p>"We haven't had our garbage emptied in over a month," said Renton resident Katrina Jones. "Nobody's calling us, they're not telling us anything."</p> <p>Jones started placing heavy stone slabs on top of the trash in her garbage bins to smash it down and create more space.</p> <p>She said in her 20 years living in Renton, she has never seen such delays.</p> <p>"Clearly, there's something different going on," said Jones.</p> <p>The additional delay from the Republic Services work stoppage means customers may have to wait until the next scheduled collection service, which could be a week to two weeks for some customers.</p> <p>"You can't burn it, you know," said LaTonya Rogers, who has been living in Renton for 24 years. "It's piling up, so we've been storing it."</p> <p>Rogers said her husband has been hoping to drop off excess trash at transfer stations, but was unable to. They instead opted to store some trash in the garage and a spare truck.</p> <p>"What we worry about is rodents, you know?" said Rogers.</p> <p>The mayor of Renton issued a letter acknowledging the delays and reiterated the automated call that customers received about the delay, which said the company will collect double the regular trash amount at no charge on the next regular service collection day.</p> <p>"We are actively discussing this disruption and alternatives for collection while reviewing solutions with Republic Services," said Renton Mayor Armondo Pavone.</p> <p>Customers in Kenmore and Covington reported to KING 5 they are experiencing the same thing.</p> <p>In Kent, the public works department said it is in touch with Republic Services regarding the interruptions related to the strike in California.</p>

	<p>"The City of Kent was notified this morning that Republic Services drivers in Puget Sound walked out to support the sanitation strikes. Republic Services let customers know via phone first thing this morning," an email from the City of Kent Public Works Department stated.</p> <p>Kent residents will also be notified via automated calls if there are further delays.</p> <p>As with Renton, Republic Services said it will collect missed pickups on the next scheduled collection day.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	01/12 Kent PD chief meets w/public; Nazi uproar
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/kent-police-chief-meets-with-public-after-requesting-assistant-chief-to-resign-for-displaying-nazi-insignia
GIST	<p>KENT, Wash. - Chief Rafael Padilla of the Kent Police Department spoke for the first time on Wednesday since publicly calling for the resignation of assistant chief Derek Kammerzell, who displayed Nazi insignia on his office door in 2020.</p> <p>During a regularly scheduled "Coffee With the Chief" event, Padilla answered questions from community members about his request for Kammerzell to step down.</p> <p>"The reason why we're calling for, in part to that's the right thing to do, it's also a reality thing that says you can't be a police officer just because. There's no way to do your job effectively going forward and it will continue to undermine the reputation of our department to have that happen," said Padilla.</p> <p>Kammerzell was a 27-year veteran with the Kent Police Department. An investigation revealed that Kammerzell displayed a Nazi insignia on his office door in September 2020.</p> <p>The insignia was taken down after four days when a detective in the investigations bureau, which Kammerzell commanded, filed a complaint.</p> <p>Kammerzell currently oversees the department's patrol division. The police department suspended him without pay for two weeks in July 2021.</p> <p>Details of the incident were released publicly in late December after a records request to the City of Kent, and public outcry immediately sparked nationwide.</p> <p>"Transparency means just that. Transparency. Transparency doesn't mean when something happens then all of a sudden somewhere down the line, '[gasp] they found out! Now we've got to do something about it'," said Gwen Allen-Carston, the executive director of Kent Black Action Commission.</p> <p>People who live and work in Kent said they were concerned that Kammerzell's punishment did not fit his actions. Padilla said he has been listening to the "overwhelming amount of hurt" the situation caused his community.</p> <p>"We did not have the best outcome based on the decisions we made. And we realize now that we have to do a lot more," said Padilla.</p> <p>The chief and Mayor Dana Ralph publicly called for Kammerzell's resignation on January 7. Padilla said they are now processing this request with the Kent Police Officers Association.</p> <p>"We're bringing in expert attorneys to resolve this the right way and have it be done. I will assure the community that during this time before his resignation he will have zero contact with the community. He's not able to function in a role as a police officer while he's on leave," said Padilla.</p> <p>Padilla said he is also recruiting help to review the department's current protocols.</p>

	<p>"So, the question becomes—is there enhancements we need to make or should make? And we're going to take this outside of us for those recommendations. We're not going to rely on what we thought was best practices. We are going to look to outside people to come and say this is what you need to do," said Padilla.</p> <p>The chief said the police force would also participate in sensitivity training.</p> <p>"We're going to interject specific awareness regarding our Jewish community, the impacts of the Holocaust, awareness about what that means to people that are both survivors and families of those who were lost in the Holocaust. So, we will bring a greater awareness to our officers," said Padilla.</p> <p>The chief further mentioned the department regularly participates in other diversity and inclusion sessions throughout the year.</p> <p>FOX13 News requested comment from the Kent Police Officers Association regarding the city's call for Kammerzell's resignation and is awaiting a response.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/13 Russia: Ukraine crisis talks at 'dead end'
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-us-nato-talks-so-far-unsuccessful-2022-01-13/
GIST	<p>VIENNA/MOSCOW, Jan 13 (Reuters) - Russia said on Thursday it was hitting a dead end in its efforts to persuade the West to bar Ukraine from joining NATO and roll back decades of alliance expansion in Europe, and threatened unspecified consequences in response.</p> <p>Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov was quoted by TASS news agency as saying Russian military specialists were providing options to President Vladimir Putin in case the situation around Ukraine worsens, but diplomacy must be given a chance.</p> <p>He said talks with the United States in Geneva on Monday and with NATO in Brussels on Wednesday had shown there was a "dead end or difference of approaches", and he saw no reason to sit down again in the coming days to re-start the same discussions.</p> <p>Russia has forced the United States and its allies to the negotiating table by assembling around 100,000 troops near the border with Ukraine, while denying it plans to invade.</p> <p>It gave a stark assessment of this week's diplomacy before it had even finished, as talks were under way in Vienna on Thursday at the 57-nation Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. (OSCE). "If we don't hear constructive response to our proposals within reasonable timeframe & aggressive behaviour towards (Russia) continues, we'll have to take necessary measures to ensure strategic balance and eliminate unacceptable threats to our national security," the Russian mission to the OSCE said on Twitter, quoting its Ambassador Alexander Lukashevich.</p> <p>Poland's foreign minister said in Vienna that Europe was closer to war than any time in the last 30 years and the U.S. envoy said the West should not give in to blackmail.</p> <p>Russia says that after decades of NATO expansion it is determined to draw red lines and stop the alliance from admitting Ukraine as a member or basing missiles there.</p> <p>The United States says Russian demands to veto Ukrainian membership and halt NATO military activity in eastern Europe are non-starters, but it is willing to talk to Moscow about arms control, missile deployments and confidence-building measures.</p> <p>Ryabkov said the United States and its NATO allies were "not ready to meet our key requirements" and were only ready to discuss issues of secondary importance to Moscow.</p>

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that this week's talks had yielded some "positive nuances" but this was not enough. He said disagreement remained on fundamental questions.

He criticised a sanctions bill unveiled by U.S. Senate Democrats on Wednesday that would target top Russian government and military officials, including President Vladimir Putin, as well as key banking institutions, if Russia attacks Ukraine.

Peskov said sanctioning Putin would be tantamount to severing relations.

"We view the appearance of such documents and statements extremely negatively against the background of an ongoing series of negotiations, albeit unsuccessful ones," he said.

At the OSCE talks in Vienna, Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau called for a peaceful resolution over Ukraine.

"It seems that the risk of war in the OSCE area is now greater than ever before in the last 30 years," Rau said in a speech, without naming Russia.

U.S. ambassador Michael Carpenter told the OSCE meeting: "As we prepare for an open dialogue on how to strengthen security for the benefit of all, we must decisively reject blackmail and never allow aggression and threats to be rewarded."

Russia has said it will decide on its next moves after this week's talks. It has threatened unspecified "military -technical measures" if its demands are rejected.

U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said on Wednesday that if Russia walked away, it would show it was never serious about diplomacy in the first place.

The United States has largely settled on the options for sanctions against Russia should it invade Ukraine and will be prepared to impose them as soon as any tanks roll, senior Biden administration officials said on Wednesday.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/13 US: 'unlawful' China maritime claims
SOURCE	https://www.newsmax.com/newsfront/us-beijing-south-china-sea/2022/01/13/id/1052203/
GIST	<p>The United States on Wednesday laid out its most detailed case yet against Beijing's "unlawful" claims in the South China Sea, rejecting both the geographic and historic bases for its vast, divisive map.</p> <p>In a 47-page research paper, the State Department's Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs said China had no basis under international law for claims that have put Beijing on a collision course with the Philippines, Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations.</p> <p>"The overall effect of these maritime claims is that the PRC unlawfully claims sovereignty or some form of exclusive jurisdiction over most of the South China Sea," the paper said, referring to the People's Republic of China.</p> <p>"These claims gravely undermine the rule of law in the oceans and numerous universally recognized provisions of international law reflected in the Convention," it said, referring to a 1982 UN treaty on the law of the sea ratified by China -- but not the United States.</p> <p>Releasing the study, a State Department statement called again on Beijing "to cease its unlawful and coercive activities in the South China Sea."</p> <p>China hit back on Thursday, claiming the report "distorts international law and misleads the public."</p>

"The US refuses to sign the treaty but portrays itself as a judge and wantonly distorts the treaty," said foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin at a briefing.

"In seeking its own selfish interests it uses multiple standards to carry out political manipulation."

The paper is an update of a 2014 study that similarly disputed the so-called "nine-dash line" that forms the basis for much of Beijing's stance.

In 2016, an international court sided with the Philippines in its complaints over China's claims.

Beijing replied by offering new justifications, including saying that China had "historic rights" over the area.

The State Department paper said that such historical-based claims had "no legal basis" and that China had not offered specifics.

It also took issue with geographic justifications for China's claims, saying that more than 100 features Beijing highlights in the South China Sea are submerged by water during high tide and therefore are "beyond the lawful limits of any state's territorial sea."

Beijing cites such geographic features to claim four "island groups," which the State Department study said did not meet criteria for baselines under the UN convention.

The report was issued as the United States increasingly challenges China on the global stage, identifying the rising communist power as its chief long-term threat.

The South China Sea is home to valuable oil and gas deposits and shipping lanes, and Beijing's neighbors have frequently voiced concern that their giant neighbor was seeking to expand its reach.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/13 Russia deploy army Cuba, Venezuela?
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/europe-russia-ukraine-vladimir-putin-moscow-473d4b2eebff4dc59d8e7dff9e8653ba
GIST	<p>MOSCOW (AP) — Russia on Thursday sharply raised the stakes in a showdown with the West over Ukraine, with a top diplomat saying he wouldn't exclude a Russian military deployment to Cuba and Venezuela if tensions with the United States mount.</p> <p>Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, who led the Russian delegation in Monday's talks with the United States in Geneva, said in televised remarks that he would neither confirm nor exclude the possibility that Russia could send military assets to Cuba and Venezuela.</p> <p>The negotiations in Geneva and Wednesday's NATO-Russia meeting in Vienna failed to narrow the gap on Moscow's security demands amid a buildup of Russian troops near Ukraine. While Moscow demanded a halt to NATO expansion, Washington and its allies firmly rejected them as a nonstarter.</p> <p>Speaking in an interview with Russian RTVI TV broadcast, Ryabkov noted that "it all depends on the action by our U.S. counterparts," adding that President Vladimir Putin has warned that Russia could take military-technical measures if the U.S. provokes Moscow and turns up military pressure on it.</p> <p>Ryabkov said a refusal by the U.S. and its allies to consider the key Russian demand for guarantees against the alliance's expansion to Ukraine and other ex-Soviet nations raises doubts about continuing the talks.</p> <p>Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov noted "some positive elements and nuances" during the talks, but described them as "unsuccessful" because of stark disagreements on Russia's key demands.</p>

“The talks were initiated to receive specific answers to concrete principal issues that were raised, and disagreements remained on those principal issues, which is bad,” he said in a conference call with reporters.

Peskov warned of a complete rupture U.S.-Russian relations if proposed sanctions targeting Russian President Vladimir Putin and other top civilian and military leaders are adopted. The measures, proposed by Senate Democrats, would also target leading Russian financial institutions if Moscow sends troops into Ukraine.

Peskov criticized the proposals as an attempt to up the pressure on Moscow during the talks, saying it wouldn’t work.

“It concerns sanctions, which taking into account the inevitable adequate response, effectively amount to an initiative to rupture relations,” he warned, adding that Russian will respond in kind to protect its interests.

The talks come as an estimated 100,000 combat-ready Russian troops, tanks and heavy military equipment are massed near Ukraine’s eastern border. The buildup has caused deep concerns in Kyiv and the West that Moscow is preparing for an invasion. Russia denies that it’s pondering an invasion and in turn accuses the West of threatening its security by positioning military personnel and equipment in Central and Eastern Europe.

Peskov rebuffed the West’s calls for Russia to help deescalate tensions by pulling back troops from areas near Ukraine, noting that the country is free to move them wherever it deems necessary on its own territory.

“It’s hardly possible for NATO to dictate to us where we should move our armed forces on the Russian territory,” he said.

Peskov underscored that Russia is ready to continue the talks but wants them to produce results. “There will be no deficit of a political will to continue the negotiations,” he said.

Tensions revolving around Ukraine and Russia’s demands on the West again appeared on the table at Thursday’s meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Vienna.

Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau, who assumed the position of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, noted in his opening speech that “the risk of war in the OSCE area is now greater than ever before in the last 30 years.”

“For several weeks, we have been faced with the possibility of a major military escalation in Eastern Europe,” he said. “We have recently heard a demand for security guarantees related to an important part of the OSCE area and the renewed discourse about spheres of influence. All these aspects require a serious international assessment and a proper reaction.”

Rau emphasized the need to “focus on a peaceful resolution of a conflict in and around Ukraine ... in full respect of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders.”

In 2014, Russia annexed Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula after the ouster of its Moscow-friendly leader and threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency in the country’s east, where more than seven years of fighting has killed over 14,000 people.

A 2015 peace deal brokered by France and Germany has helped end large-scale battles, but frequent skirmishes have continued and efforts to negotiate a political settlement have failed.

HEADLINE	01/13 Australia runaway omicron outbreak
SOURCE	https://news.trust.org/item/20220113020254-pgxzb
GIST	<p>SYDNEY, Jan 13 (Reuters) - Australia on Thursday reported its biggest pandemic caseload with a runaway Omicron outbreak driving up hospitalisation rates as the surge put severe strain on supply chains forcing authorities to ease quarantine rules for more workers.</p> <p>After successfully containing the virus earlier in the pandemic, Australia has reported nearly a million cases over the last two weeks as people slowly get adjusted to living with the coronavirus amid fewer restrictions. Total infections detected since the pandemic began neared 1.4 million.</p> <p>More than 147,000 new cases have been recorded so far on Thursday in Australia, with about 92,000 in the most populous state of New South Wales (NSW), although that includes a backlog of positive at-home results dating back to the beginning of January.</p> <p>Net new hospital admissions and people admitted to intensive care are at their highest in the pandemic but authorities have said the health systems can cope with the rising cases.</p> <p>A total of 53 new deaths have been reported so far, with NSW suffering its deadliest day of the pandemic with 22 deaths. But the death rate during the Omicron wave is lower than prior outbreaks in Australia, where more than 92% of people above 16 are double-dosed and a booster drive is ramping up.</p> <p>Amid pressure on supply chains, Victorian state authorities on Thursday exempted more workers from quarantine requirements for being close contacts. Staff in emergency services, education and transport can go back to work if they are symptom-free.</p> <p>"There is no quick fix to this," Victoria Premier Daniel Andrews said during a media conference on Thursday. "These are commonsense changes, they will help but they are not everything, there is no simple solution."</p> <p>Victoria's move comes ahead of a meeting of the national cabinet - the group of federal and state leaders - later on Thursday, where Prime Minister Scott Morrison will propose steps https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/australia-covid-19-infections-hit-1-million-omicron-drives-record-surge-2022-01-09 to relieve the pressure on business supply chains.</p> <p>Queensland state on Thursday decided to fully open its domestic borders for the first time in nearly two years with travellers not required to carry border passes and negative COVID-19 results.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	01/13 Omicron peaks in UK; hope wave recedes
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-peak-appears-to-have-passed-in-u-k-offering-hope-the-wave-is-receding-11642078349
GIST	<p>LONDON—The U.K. appears to have surpassed the peak of the latest wave of Covid-19 caused by Omicron, a promising sign that the highly transmissible variant's impact may be brief, if intense, and fueling optimism that the pandemic may be waning.</p> <p>Scientists say British data offer encouraging signs for countries behind the U.K. in the Omicron wave—such as the U.S.—that the variant is echoing the pattern it followed in South Africa, where cases rose rapidly over the course of just over a month, before falling back.</p> <p>The seven-day average of new daily cases of Covid-19 in the U.K. has been falling for a week and on Tuesday dropped below the 14-day average for the first time since November, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of official data. Both are signs that caseloads are diminishing.</p>

The rate of increase in the number of new Covid-19 hospitalizations has also slowed and in England—and especially London, which experienced the Omicron wave sooner than other regions—new hospital admissions with Covid-19 are falling. The first cases of Omicron were detected in the U.K. on Nov. 27.

Scientists caution, however, that caseloads and hospital admissions may yet reverse course as social mixing increases with the end of the holiday season and the start of the new school term.

Up to now, the British experience has further bolstered the conviction that Omicron is milder than previous versions of the virus—at least in places like the U.K. where vaccination rates among older and more vulnerable people are very high.

The trends are generating optimism that the worst of Omicron—and possibly the whole pandemic—is receding. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has signaled he isn't likely to maintain limited public-health restrictions, such as working from home, that were put in place to contain Omicron beyond Jan. 26, when they are due to expire.

“At least in my hospital, we think the peak of inpatient admissions with Covid may be in the next week or so,” said Tom Wingfield, an infectious-diseases physician treating patients in Liverpool, England. He said that in his district he's expecting more admissions as case rates are rising in older, more vulnerable groups, but said that nationally, “we seem to be turning a corner now.”

“We're all tired, but I'm much more positive about 2022, at least in the U.K.,” Dr. Wingfield said.

The seven-day average of daily reported cases in the U.K. fell to 148,357 Wednesday, falling below the 14-day average daily caseload for the second day in a row, a sign the epidemic is in retreat. The last time the 14-day average was higher than the seven-day average was Nov. 12.

The share of tests that return a positive result—another gauge of whether an outbreak is growing or declining—has also reversed course. The positivity rate registered 8.8% on Jan. 11, according to the University of Oxford's Our World in Data project. That is roughly twice the rate it was before Omicron was detected but is lower than the 11% rate recorded on Jan. 4.

Hospital admissions in England have also started to fall after rising rapidly as the Omicron wave got under way late last year. Admissions in England, which published the most up-to-date data and accounts for most admissions, fell 1% during the seven days through Jan. 10 compared with a week earlier, to 14,072, according to official data. That compares with week-on-week increases that exceeded 70% around the turn of the year.

Admissions in London, where Omicron arrived earlier than other parts of the country, fell 19% over the seven days through Jan. 10 compared with a week earlier, data show.

Scientists said the latest data may not be fully capturing cases and hospital activity because of the holidays and because of recent changes to the U.K.'s testing regime. The government recently ditched a requirement for people receiving a positive result on a rapid antigen test to get a confirmatory PCR test as well, which may be affecting reported cases.

Still, other data paint a similar picture. A closely watched data set produced by the Office for National Statistics, for instance, estimates that more than 7% of the population of England—3.7 million people—had Covid-19 in the week ended Jan. 6. That is up from 6.4% the previous week, but the rate of increase is slowing. The ONS's modeling suggests cases in London, where the U.K.'s Omicron outbreak first took off, fell during the same period.

In contrast to the U.S., where hospitalizations have reached a record high, the impact of Omicron on hospitals in the U.K. has been smaller than in previous bursts of infection. Hospital admissions in January last year in England reached 34,000, with more than 3,800 admissions a day.

Daily admissions in England currently are around 2,000 a day. The number of people severely ill in the hospital has been markedly lower with Omicron. In England, there were 672 people in mechanical ventilation beds Jan. 12, 12% fewer than a week earlier and less than a fifth of the maximum occupancy of 3,736 reached in January 2021.

Doctors credit the reduction in severity to widespread vaccination and a booster campaign that has meant more than 91% of over 50s and over had a third dose by Jan. 6. Analysis by public health officials and scientists in the U.K. and South Africa suggests the variant is also associated with milder disease in general, perhaps because it appears to be less adept at penetrating deep into the lungs than earlier variants.

Less clear is precisely why the Omicron wave appears to peak so quickly, relative to those driven earlier variants.

Mark Woolhouse, professor of infectious-disease epidemiology at the University of Edinburgh, said there are several possible reasons: One might be that it spreads so fast it runs out of potential hosts more quickly. Another might be big changes in behavior as people switched to working from home and took other steps to limit contact with others that affected its spread.

A third explanation, which he said he favors, is that Omicron replicates so much quicker. In epidemiological models, a shorter interval between each doubling of infections compresses the epidemic wave.

“You get a much spikier peak, much faster up and much faster down, if the generation time is shorter,” Prof. Woolhouse said.

If the U.K. is nearing the peak of its Omicron wave, South Africa is already on the downslope.

The first case of the variant was detected by scientists in South Africa in the first half of November and propelled recorded cases to a new peak of 23,000 a day, a little over a month later. Caseloads slowed sharply in the final weeks of December and had fallen back to around 7,000 a day by Jan. 11, according to Our World in Data. The South African government on Dec. 31 said it had passed the peak, citing the decline in cases and hospital admissions.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 WHO: omicron cases ‘off the charts’
SOURCE	https://www.cnbc.com/2022/01/12/who-says-omicron-cases-are-off-the-charts-as-global-infections-set-new-records.html
GIST	<p>A record 15 million new Covid-19 infections were reported across the globe in a single week as omicron rapidly replaces delta as the dominant variant across the globe, and “we know this is an underestimate,” World Health Organization Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters at a press briefing Wednesday.</p> <p>“The sheer volume of cases is putting a burden on health-care systems,” said Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO’s technical lead on Covid-19. “Even though omicron is less severe than delta, it is still putting people in the hospital. It is still putting people into ICU and needing advanced clinical care. It is still killing people.”</p> <p>The U.S. saw the biggest jump in cases with 4.6 million new infections reported for the week through Sunday, a 73% increase over the prior week, compared to a 55% global increase in cases over the same period, according to a the WHO’s weekly epidemiology report published Tuesday.</p> <p>Tedros noted that hospitalizations are not quite as high as seen in previous surges, possibly due to decreased severity of omicron compared to delta and widespread immunity from vaccines and prior infection. But, he added, the death rate is still unsustainably high, with an average of about 48,000 deaths per week, which hasn’t fluctuated much since October, Tedros said.</p>

“We’re seeing omicron out-compete delta in many populations,” Van Kerkhove said. While delta cases similarly peaked in a few months, it didn’t take over the globe as quickly nor were the cases as high as omicron. “This is off the charts,” she said.

Among more than 357,000 cases sequenced in the last 30 days, nearly 59% were omicron, the WHO said in the epidemiological report. The WHO, the United Nations’ health organization, cautioned that the data may not fully show how far omicron has spread due to reporting delays and limits sequencing in some countries.

According to the report, omicron has a shorter doubling time than other variants, meaning the number of days it takes for cases to double, and it can more readily evade prior immunity, allowing it an advantage over other variants.

While omicron has appeared to rip through populations where it was detected early and then drop down to lower levels, Van Kerkhove said delta had a similar trajectory at its height, but never peaked at such levels as omicron.

But, she emphasized, the direction of omicron can still be influenced by the world’s actions, including vaccination and taking steps to minimize spread.

“There is no inevitability about this virus and how it circulates,” she said. “We have control, some measure of control, in terms of limiting its spread with tools that we have access to: masks, distancing, ventilation, avoiding crowds.”

Van Kerkhove said the WHO expects the virus will continue to evolve to become more fit and either more or less severe, that there will continue to be outbreaks of disease among the unvaccinated and that as different populations mix, outbreaks of other viruses will sometimes occur at the same time as those of Covid.

“The virus is well on its way to becoming endemic,” Van Kerkhove said. “But we’re not there yet.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 Calif. asymptomatic healthcare staff at work
SOURCE	https://news.yahoo.com/hospitals-reeling-california-tells-covid-130036030.html
GIST	<p>Daylong waits in the emergency room. No one to answer the phones. No one to take out the trash. And more patients arriving each day.</p> <p>That's the scene playing out at some hospitals across Southern California as the Omicron-fueled surge of COVID-19 contributes to a crippling shortage of doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers. While Omicron is causing significantly fewer serious illnesses than last year's winter surge, the unprecedented number of people becoming infected has left the medical infrastructure on edge.</p> <p>State officials are attempting to address California's staffing shortage through a sweeping policy change that allows asymptomatic healthcare workers who have tested positive for the coronavirus to return to work immediately. The policy, set to remain in place through Feb. 1, is designed to keep many healthcare workers on the job at a time when hospitals are expecting more patients.</p> <p>Some experts say California's stance is an unorthodox yet necessary solution to a difficult problem. Yet many healthcare workers and community members say the policy is not only ill-advised, it's potentially dangerous.</p> <p>"The situation just feels so hopeless," said Erin McIntosh, a rapid-response nurse at Riverside Community Hospital. "I went into healthcare wanting to help people, but now I'm the vector. Someone is coming to me in their time of need, and I could potentially be passing them COVID."</p>

McIntosh said Monday that more than 300 nurses and many other staff members at the hospital are out sick because of COVID-19, and that those who remain are stretched to the brink. Some nurses are having to take on far too many patients, while others can't even find an assistant to help bring patients to the bathroom.

But potentially exposing patients to hospital workers who have tested positive — even if the workers are not feeling ill or showing symptoms — is not the solution, McIntosh said. Already, she has heard of coronavirus-positive workers attending to women in labor, chemotherapy patients and patients in neonatal intensive care.

"Now they're even more vulnerable," she said.

The California Department of Public Health said [hospitals are reaching capacity](#), and the decision was driven in large part by staffing shortages making it difficult to provide essential care.

"Given those conditions, the department is providing temporary flexibility to help hospitals and emergency services providers respond to an unprecedented surge and staffing shortages," the agency said.

According to the guidelines, hospitals should exhaust all other options before resorting to the new policy, and workers who have tested positive for the virus should "preferably be assigned to work with COVID-19 positive patients." The workers must always wear N95 masks.

The announcement was met with outrage by many in the healthcare industry.

The decision is "irresponsible and a huge mistake that will jeopardize everyone's health," said Rosanna Mendez, executive director of SEIU 121RN, a union representing workers in Southern California. "This plan is unscientific and dangerous, and, given what we know about the [transmissibility of the new variant](#), we believe it will put healthcare workers and patients at unnecessary risk."

But some experts say that patients who are seen by asymptomatic workers following proper protocols are relatively safe, and that the policy — while not perfect — is a necessary stopgap to keep the system from collapsing.

"Is the situation ideal? No," said Dr. Robert-Kim Farley, an epidemiologist and infectious-diseases expert at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health. "Is it the lesser of the two evils of having no one to care for patients, versus having staff caring for them that may have COVID? Yes, it's the lesser of two evils."

Kim-Farley said the policy is a recognition of the significant strain hospitals are experiencing amid an increased number of patients and decreased number of staff. The chances of transmission from an asymptomatic worker are minimal, he said, particularly since he or she would be practicing precautions, including wearing high-grade medical masks.

But, he added, "when patient loads start to drop, and also staff shortages are reduced, we should move away from this extraordinary approach."

The situation in many hospitals already seems untenable, and some healthcare workers said the new policy is creating more stress for an already overloaded workforce. Others said it was hypocritical of the state to ask coronavirus-positive staffers to report for duty after [instituting a vaccine mandate](#) that cost some workers their jobs.

Gabriel Montoya, an emergency medical technician at Kaiser Downey, said when he arrived at work one day last week, there were still patients in the waiting room who had been sitting there when he left the night before.

All of the emergency department's beds — including 80 in the ER and 20 in a tent outside — have been full since the start of the year, he said. Housekeepers, environmental service workers, delivery workers and even the lab workers who process COVID-19 tests are out sick.

Yet the policy change doesn't account for the realities of daily patient care, which often necessitate "working inches away from each other," he said. Instead of solving the problem, it could exacerbate it. "You're going to get more people sick," Montoya said. "That's what's going to happen."

What's more, he said the change exposes not only patients and workers, but also their loved ones. Montoya cares for his mother at home.

"Workers are feeling like they're being devalued — their own lives, their families' lives — are being disrespected," he said. "And then they're being retraumatized by again having to go into the workplace facing obstacles that we didn't have to face the day before."

A spokesman for Kaiser said the company is adhering to guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention while it reviews the new state policy. The CDC [currently recommends](#) that asymptomatic healthcare workers return to work after seven days with a negative test, although it, too, allows for the removal of those restrictions during times of crisis.

Dr. Joanne Spetz, director of the Philip R. Lee Institute for Health Policy Studies at UC San Francisco, said the newness of Omicron makes it difficult to compare the risk of staffing shortages to the risk of patient exposure, as there is little data about the new variant with which to work.

One thing that is clear, however, is that [understaffing poses a substantial risk](#) to patients. Research has found that short staffing results in more deaths, more morbidity and more accidents and errors, she said.

"Hospitals are really stuck between a rock and a hard place, in that you really do have these staffing shortages and you have volumes of patients increasing," Spetz said. "What do you do?"

Some hospitals, including Los Angeles County-USC — the largest public hospital in L.A. — are weighing the options. The L.A. County Department of Health Services is reviewing the proposed guidelines but has not yet issued an official policy, hospital officials said in an email.

"As always, when addressing any changes to our expected practices, L.A. County Department of Health Services will make adjustments that follow data-driven science and uphold our responsibility to the well-being of our staff, patients and the communities we serve," they said.

California Health and Human Services Secretary Dr. Mark Ghaly said similarly Monday that the guidelines are not a requirement and asked healthcare systems to use the measure only if they've explored all other options.

But Tuesday, nurses and representatives with the SEIU 721 union gathered outside the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors meeting in downtown L.A. to speak out against the measure. The California Nurses Assn. said it was similarly planning a "day of action" Thursday to condemn the state's decision.

Dr. Ileana Meza, an SEIU union chair and nurse practitioner at L.A. County-USC, said the staffing situation at the hospital was dire. When she arrived at work Monday, the parking lot looked empty because so many people were out sick. Thirty emergency room nurses and 40 operating room nurses called in sick last week, and some patients are waiting up to 20 hours for admission.

But there are other, safer solutions to the staffing crisis than asking coronavirus-positive healthcare workers to tend to patients, she said, including investing in more staffing, making efforts to improve compensation and morale, tightening visitor controls, canceling all non-elective and non-critical procedures and focusing on telemedicine.

	<p>"With this new decision, if you come to the hospital for a routine check, you may be checked in by a clerk who's positive, you may have your vitals taken by a nurse who's positive, you might be seen by a doctor who's positive," Meza said.</p> <p>"That means you're coming into the facility without the virus and you may contract the virus," she said.</p> <p>"This is not the way to drive this pandemic down."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/13 France: teachers strike; protest protocols
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/13/europe/france-teacher-strike-covid-intl/index.html
GIST	<p>Paris (CNN)At least three-quarters of elementary school teachers in France were reported to be on strike and half of elementary schools were closed Thursday in protest at the government's Covid-19 protocols, according to a French teachers' union.</p> <p>At least 62% of high school and middle school teachers are also reported to be striking, according to the union which represents them.</p> <p>In Paris, 58% of teachers are on strike, and nearly 200 schools are closed Thursday, according to the mayor's office.</p> <p>A protest is expected to start at 1:30 p.m. local time in Paris, according to teachers' unions. However, small groups of teachers were already seen taking to the streets by the Arc de Triomphe in Paris as well as in other cities Thursday morning.</p> <p>The French Ministry of Education told CNN on Thursday it had no official figures yet regarding the size of the strike.</p> <p>A French trade unionist speaking on radio station France Info on Thursday morning said the strike was "not against the virus," but rather "a strike against the lack of consultation."</p> <p>Laurent Berger, head of the French Democratic Confederation of Labor, whose union joined the strike Thursday, said the schools learned of the new protocol only one day before the new school year started, adding that the rules were changing "all the time."</p> <p>Teachers and personnel are "fed-up," according to Berger, who accused Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer of "mishandling" the pandemic in schools.</p> <p>On Monday, Prime Minister Jean Castex announced a softening of the testing protocols introduced at the beginning of January for French students.</p> <p>Students will now only be required to take three Covid-19 tests at home following a positive case in their class before returning to school.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Army relieves 6 active-duty commanders
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/army-commanders-relieved-covid-19-vaccine/
GIST	<p>The Army has relieved six active-duty commanders, including two battalion commanders, and issued 2,994 general officer written reprimands to soldiers for refusing a COVID vaccine.</p> <p>In a release Wednesday, the Army said the punishments were for refusing the lawful order by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. The Army has not yet initiated separations for soldiers refusing the vaccine but expects further guidance later this month.</p>

Return to Top	<p>At least 96% of active-duty soldiers in the Army are fully vaccinated. The deadline set by the Army for active-duty soldiers to complete their COVID vaccination was December 15, 2021.</p> <p>The Army has not granted any religious exemption requests but has received 2,128 requests. The Navy, Air Force and Marines also have not granted any religious exemption requests so far.</p> <p>According to the Navy's weekly update, the Navy has 5,209 active-duty sailors who remain unvaccinated and 2,968 members of the ready reserve. Commanders have separated 20 soldiers who were within 180 days of active-duty service for refusing the COVID-19 vaccine.</p> <p>Austin mandated the vaccine in September but left it up to the services to set the deadlines. The deadlines for the active component and reserve component for each service to receive a vaccine have passed, except for the Army National Guard who still has until June 30.</p> <p>As of now, boosters are not required to be considered "fully vaccinated" and comply with the Pentagon's COVID-19 rule, but as the Omicron wave started rolling through the country, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby has said a booster requirement is under active discussion at the Defense Department.</p>
-------------------------------	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

HEADLINE	01/12 Army ups enlistment bonus to \$50,000
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/army-covid-staffing-shortages-recruit-bonuses/
GIST	<p>The U.S. Army is for the first time offering a maximum enlistment bonus of \$50,000 to highly skilled recruits who join for six years, The Associated Press has learned, as the service struggles to lure soldiers into certain critical jobs amid the continuing pandemic.</p> <p>Major General Kevin Vereen, head of Army Recruiting Command, told AP that shuttered schools and the competitive job market over the past year have posed significant challenges for recruiters. So heading into the most difficult months of the year for recruiting, the Army is hoping that some extra cash and a few other changes will entice qualified young people to sign up.</p> <p>"We are still living the implications of 2020 and the onset of COVID, when the school systems basically shut down," said Vereen. "We lost a full class of young men and women that we didn't have contact with, face-to-face."</p> <p>Two years of the pandemic have made it more difficult to recruit in schools and at public events, and the competition for quality workers has intensified as young people weigh their options.</p> <p>Some, said Vereen, are taking what he calls a gap year, and "are making the decision that they don't necessarily need to work right now."</p> <p>The annual recruiting goal fluctuates as currently serving soldiers decide whether to reenlist or leave. In the last two years, as the pandemic raged, many decided to stay in, lessening the pressure on recruiting. Last year's recruiting goal was 57,500, and Vereen said it will be about the same this year.</p> <p>To entice recruits, those who sign up for a six-year enlistment in one of several high-demand career fields can get bonuses that total as much as \$50,000. Given the high standards, it will be difficult for many to qualify for the top bonus.</p> <p>The final figure depends on when they agree to ship out for training, if they already have critical skills and if they choose airborne or ranger posts. Certain careers — such as missile defense crew, special forces, signals intelligence and fire control specialists who coordinate battlefield weapons operations — can often come with the maximum bonuses. But other key jobs include infantry, intelligence analyst, combat medic specialist, military police, combat engineer and several others. And those may change every month, based on available spots in the training pipeline and other service needs.</p>

Until now, the Army has offered a maximum bonus of \$40,000.

"We're in a competitive market," said Vereen. "How we incentivize is absolutely essential, and that is absolutely something that we know that is important to trying to get somebody to come and join the military."

According to Vereen, the total amount of bonuses available hasn't been set. But the money has decreased every year since a peak of more than \$485 million in 2018, after the Army failed to meet its annual recruiting goal. In the fiscal year that ended last September 30, the Army spent more than \$233 million on bonuses, with about 16,500 recruits getting an average enlistment bonus of more than \$14,000.

"We want to promote the value of serving your country first," said Vereen. "But we also know that, this generation and I guess human nature, you know, it's all about compensation, too."

Compounding the issue is the highly contagious Omicron variant, which is prompting some school systems to shut down — just as recruiters want to get into the schools or get out to sports events to woo candidates.

As a result, Brigadier General John Cushing, the deputy commander at Recruiting Command, said the Army decided to tweak its bonus systems. In previous years, said Cushing, the Army spread out the bonuses "sort of evenly like peanut butter across the whole accessions (recruiting) year." This year, the money will be concentrated in the next few months when it is really needed.

"It is certainly a weapon that we have in our arsenal. And I think we've used it effectively and I'm very confident we'll get after it again this year," said Cushing.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 US designates NKorea officials w/sanctions
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/u-s-designates-entities-and-individuals-linked-to-north-korea-weapons-programs/
GIST	<p><i>The following statement was released by Secretary of State Tony Blinken</i></p> <p>The United States has designated eight DPRK-linked individuals and entities under Executive Order 13382, which targets proliferators of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and WMD delivery systems. The seven individuals and one entity designated today are all linked to the DPRK's weapons programs.</p> <p>These designations convey our serious and ongoing concern about the DPRK's continued proliferation activities and those who support it. The United States will use every appropriate tool to address the DPRK's WMD and ballistic missile programs, which constitute a serious threat to international peace and security and undermine the global nonproliferation regime.</p> <p>Specifically, the U.S. Department of State has designated one DPRK individual, one Russian individual, and one Russian entity that have engaged in activities or transactions that have materially contributed to the proliferation of WMD or their means of delivery by DPRK.</p> <p>Between at least 2018 and 2021, Russia-based DPRK national O Yong Ho has procured and engaged in efforts to procure missile-applicable items from third countries on behalf of the DPRK's missile program, including aramid fiber, stainless steel tubes, and ball bearings on behalf of the Rocket Industry Department (aka Ministry of Rocket Industry), which is subordinate to the DPRK's UN- and U.S.-designated Munitions Industry Department.</p> <p>Between at least 2016 and 2021, O Yong Ho worked with Russian entity Parsek LLC and Russian national Roman Anatolyevich Alar, the director for development of Russian firm Parsek LLC, to procure multiple goods with ballistic missile applications, including Kevlar thread, aramid fiber, aviation oil, ball bearings,</p>

	<p>and precision milling machines controlled by the Nuclear Suppliers Group. Roman Anatolyevich Alar also provided O Yong Ho with instructions for creating solid rocket fuel mixtures.</p> <p>The procurement and supply relationship between O Yong Ho, Roman Anatolyevich Alar, and Parsek LLC is a key source of missile-applicable goods and technology for the DPRK's missile program.</p> <p>The Department of the Treasury designations targeted five People's Republic of China- and Russia-based DPRK representatives of a DPRK entity subordinate to the DPRK's UN- and U.S.-designated Second Academy of Natural Sciences (SANS). The Department of State designated this entity in 2010 for its involvement with or provision of support for the DPRK's weapons programs.</p> <p>We have been and continue to coordinate closely with our allies and partners to address the threats posed by the DPRK's destabilizing activity and to advance our shared objective of the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. We remain committed to seeking dialogue and diplomacy with the DPRK and call on the DPRK to engage in negotiations. We urge all UN Member States to fully implement the UN Security Council resolutions addressing the DPRK.</p>
Return to Top	For more information about today's designations, please see the Department of the Treasury's press release .

HEADLINE	01/12 Mayor: 'unacceptable' SPD engaged in ruse
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/seattle/improper-use-of-ruse-by-seattle-police-during-2020-protests-unacceptable-mayor-harrell-says/281-24b66026-0f95-44e5-92bb-13b7e936e396
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell says it is "unacceptable" that police falsely reported activity over scanner traffic in a high profile incident and that current police Chief Adrian Diaz knew about it for several months.</p> <p>In a wide-ranging, hour long press conference Wednesday at Seattle City Hall, Harrell addressed the controversy that didn't really flare up until last week.</p> <p>An independent investigation determined that the Seattle Police Department's (SPD) command staff signed off on the ruse to broadcast information that the Proud Boys were coming to the Capitol Hill Occupied Zone, or CHOP, on June 8, 2020 for a confrontation. The actions were brought to light after Omari Salisbury, a journalist for Converge Media, raised questions with the Office of Police Accountability, and helped to track down the audio transmissions. The office found no evidence of Proud Boy activity.</p> <p>Harrell, in his first significant press conference as mayor, at one point looked at Diaz and said "to the police department, help me build trust. Communities don't trust you." The two noticeably stood apart. Diaz stared at the floor for most of the media availability.</p> <p>Harrell was joined by his council colleague Lisa Herbold in suggesting that an examination of existing laws are needed. The ruse was legal by definition, and Harrell said it can be used for good reasons, such as to combat internet crimes against children.</p> <p>But in this case, the city's new mayor seemed angry that SPD used the ruse at such a emotional and turbulent time - in the wake of Georg Floyd's murder.</p> <p>"In fact, it would seem to me, if we look at the history of violence in this country, look at the the chilling effect that the mentioning of the Proud Boys has on the community, particularly the Black community, when we look at the issue of violence that has occurred in this city. It is unacceptable," Harrell said.</p> <p>Harrell said Diaz, who was not in charge of the department at the time, acknowledged he knew about the ruse internally, "perhaps a few days or so," after it happened, and that it was "completely unacceptable" that it took 18 months for the issue to become public.</p>

	<p>The mayor also thanked Salisbury publicly, "This is what journalism, and tenacity and a commitment to many communities looks like in my eyes. And so, with that, I want to say thank you."</p> <p>Harrell said throughout the press conference that Diaz could say very little for due process and legal reasons, but the chief did make a short statement saying, "I have to apologize for those impacts that we created" by the ruse and the actions of the department on Capitol Hill.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Email: Seattle officials fell for SPD ruse too
SOURCE	https://southseattleemerald.com/2022/01/12/breaking-email-reveals-even-city-officials-fell-victim-to-2020-proud-boys-hoax/
GIST	<p>The <i>Emerald</i> has received an email that appears to show that the Seattle Police Department (SPD) distributed false information about the Proud Boys moving through Seattle internally among various City departments on the evening of June 8, 2020.</p> <p>The email from Seattle Public Utilities' (SPU) Emergency Manager Chad Buechler, timestamped at 6:39 p.m. on the evening the hoax was perpetrated, states that "I was asked by the [Seattle Office of Emergency Management] EOC director (Kenneth Neafcy) and Seattle Police for this information not to be distributed further than for operational needs," and goes on to list the following (emphasis by the <i>Emerald</i>): "SPD is preparing for a possible counter protest at Volunteer Park that could lead to significant volatility in the area. Intelligence reports that the Proud Boys group may be active in the area."</p> <p>This email was sent out a little less than three hours before SPD officers pretended that there was a group of Proud Boys gathering in the city. It is unclear whether the OPA took this email into account when it investigated the incident, as it only references reaching out to the Seattle Police Operations Center (SPOC) for information in its Case Closed Summary (CCS), linked above. Beuchler confirmed to the <i>Emerald</i> that that the email is authentic and that the OPA did not reach out to him about this email.</p> <p>The email then goes on to state that "SDOT, SPU, and other departments have been working this afternoon to make the area as safe as possible by clearing dumpsters, adjusting barricades, and reducing flammable materials" and that Buechler "engaged SPU Spill Response (Tim McDonald) to provide subject matter expertise on defueling of generators inside the [East] Precinct."</p> <p>The email is addressed to a handful of emergency management staff, rather than to a large group of people. Buechler states what SPU will be doing, prefacing plans with, "compared to earlier intel, tonight has the possibility to be much more violent, should a counter protest develop. I will also brief the ORC to communicate with first response crews on duty."</p> <p>Buechler then lists items that another City official briefed him on earlier that day.</p> <p>Buechler told the <i>Emerald</i> in a brief interview on the morning of Jan. 12 that he remembered the email in question. He said that he and other City officials got the information from Neafcy and SPD at the evening's EOC briefing and passed it along to operations management staff. At that point, he said, it was appropriate to pass along such information, because the police involved in the EOC briefing that evening appeared to believe that there was credible intelligence about Proud Boys being in the City.</p> <p>"Everybody shares information about what they are seeing out in the field and what they may need to respond to," Buechler said. "In this case, that was part of that update that I was sending to that smaller group [in the email] that consisted of some EOC leadership and then people who controlled folks that had people working in the field.</p> <p>"I don't believe it was a, 'Hey, they are there, they are coming,'" Buechler continued, referring to the Proud Boys, "I think it was more, 'Hey, there is a possibility, this is what we are hearing.'</p>

“Every group has people listening to their own channels, whether it’s the police, EOC representatives, or SPU, and they listen and then report on what they are hearing [to EOC management],” Buechler continued. “I don’t know if it was, ‘Hey, this is going to happen for sure,’ it was a ‘Hey, this is what we are hearing’ — the possibility. So that’s why it was shared along.”

He said he did not get this information from either of the officers in charge of the coordinated lying effort, but does not remember exactly which officers said this in the briefing.

However, this also means one of two things: either other members of SPD were also in on the hoax, or they believed, at this point, that there really were Proud Boys in the City. According to the OPA’s CCS, officers said that in perpetrating the hoax over radio, they used fake call signs to dog-whistle to other officers that the information was fake. But this did not happen until several hours after the EOC meeting referenced above. It also shows that this information was disseminated throughout City government, which means that the City expended resources to address what ended up being fake information.

The *Emerald* has reached out to the OPA for comment, but did not receive a response.

The *Emerald* also reached out to Neafcy — who works as operations coordinator in the Office of Emergency Management — but did not receive a response. If it receives any response, the *Emerald* will update this story.

Following initial publication of this story, it also occurred to the *Emerald* that the certification for this case was never posted on the Office of Inspector General’s (OIG) website, despite having been certified in September. The *Emerald* reached out to the OIG, who sent the certification showing it was certified by Lynn Erickson, who is not the [auditor under investigation](#).

The *Emerald* followed up with OIG to ask whether either Inspector General Lisa Judge, Deputy Inspector General Amy Tsai, or anyone else from OIG was present at the June 8, 2020, EOC meeting. As of this writing, neither Judge nor Tsai has responded.

According to Converge Media’s Jan. 12 [Morning Update show](#), new Mayor Bruce Harrell said when questioned by Converge Media at a press conference that same morning that none of the EOC staff told him they knew about the ruse or had information about it. The *Emerald* will link readers to the press conference as soon as the City puts it up.

At just before 4 p.m. on Jan. 12, the *Emerald* received another email. The email, also dated on the evening of June 8, 2020, was sent out from the EOC, and details cooperating EOC departments’ jobs that evening. Notably, under the Seattle Parks and Recreation Department’s roles, the email states that Parks facility and night staff had been told not to report to Capitol Hill’s Volunteer Park and Cal Anderson Park.

“All resource and facility staff will be reporting to Cal Anderson park in the morning,” the email reads.

The email was sent at 8:07 p.m. It is immediately unclear whether this order was given because, if Parks staff saw that there were no Proud Boys, they would be able to disprove the lies SPD officers would later perpetuate throughout the community and that SPD was already perpetuating throughout City government and emergency operations. Regardless of intent, it is clear that the hoax was perpetuated throughout at least the early part of the City’s emergency operations that night, if not straight into the next morning.

The EOC email lists the following finished and then-upcoming duties for SPD (formatted exactly as in the email):

- “• Finished securing East Precinct around 6PM
- Evacuated personnel from the East Precinct; remain mobile and in a safe location.
- Some vandalism reported but crowd appears to be peaceful
- Some barricades that were used to protect Precinct have been moved to block roadway
- Will continue to monitor and adapt as situation develops to keep community safe”

In a Seattle City Council [briefing](#) from this past Monday, Jan. 10, Seattle City Councilmember and Public Safety and Human Services Committee head Lisa Herbold said that after hearing concerns from constituents on the evening of June 8, 2020, she reached out to then-Chief Carmen Best.

“I did reach out to the Chief about this, and contacted her about the concerns that — not that there was a ruse, but that the Proud Boys were gathering in Seattle and was at that time told that I should be more skeptical about what I hear in the media,” Herbold said.

On the evening of Jan. 12, the *Emerald* once again received an interesting piece of information: the night before SPD perpetrated the lies that Proud Boys were roaming the City of Seattle, SPD had called in mutual aid partners from the Snohomish County Sheriff’s Office (SCSO). But the emails revealed that the SCSO officers were “working alone in the North Precinct area (not riding with SPD officers, no SPD radios).”

According to the email from SCSO Sgt. Cynthia Caterson, sent at 10:36 p.m. on June 7, 2020, SPD patrol officers at the North Precinct “are just lounging around the precincts and not responding to calls, so SCSO going to many calls and normally alone.

“SCSO recovered a stolen (unoccupied) vehicle and still no SPD officers came to even take the paper. So our deputy wrote a SCSO report to the vehicle recovered in Seattle,” the email continues. “There are also a bunch of liability concerns that I’m sure we have already considered.

“Thus, guys are very concerned about working down there with the current climate, the restrictions/bans, SPD policies and how they differ from our policies, etc. This is coupled with the fact that SPD officers are sitting around their respective precincts while other agencies are working their city,” the email continues, before closing: I just didn’t know if this SPD detail was going to be a ‘thing’, so I wanted you to be aware...”

The following morning, on June 8, 2020, at 11:00 a.m. on the dot, SCSO Operations Bureau Chief Ian Huri wrote the following in response to SPD’s request for mutual aid assistance: “I have contacted SPD and let them know we will not have any units to assist them tonight. I would like to see a better plan come together from SPD that addresses comms, report writing and officer safety among other things. I just wanted to make sure everyone was aware we responded no, in case you see emails requesting assistance for 30 officers again.

“If you have feedback from people who worked the detail, please let me know but what I have heard so far is not an acceptable risk for our folks or our agency,” Huri said.

According to the OPA CCS about the Proud Boys hoax, Named Employee #1 — who was later revealed to be now-former Captain Bryan Grenon (who retired prior to the investigation being closed) — told the OPA that he created the plan to lie about the Proud Boys’ presence in the City of Seattle, after “all our mutual aid partners ... had abandoned us.”

The *Emerald* will update this story as more information becomes available.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 DOH: 1,009,187 cases, 10,103 deaths
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article257272407.html
GIST	<p>Washington has now seen at least 1 million cases of COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic, based on data released by the state Department of Health on Wednesday.</p> <p>The state recorded 17,464 new cases Wednesday and added 75 deaths since Monday. As of Wednesday, statewide totals from the illness caused by the coronavirus were 1,009,187 cases and 10,103 deaths. The case total included 120,449 infections listed as probable.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Protesters rally on Board of Health meeting
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/protesters-descend-on-wa-board-of-health-after-misinformation-spreads-about-vaccine-plans/
GIST	<p>TUMWATER, Thurston County — Late last week, disturbing rumors started to fly on social media.</p> <p>The state Board of Health, they claimed, was about to authorize local health officials and police to round up people for refusing to get coronavirus vaccines and forcibly lock them up in quarantine facilities.</p> <p>It wasn't true. There was no such plan.</p> <p>But the falsehood spread with omicron-like rapidity, fueled by misinformation from anti-vaccine activists, some conservative radio hosts and at least three Republican congressional candidates.</p> <p>By the time the health board convened on Wednesday, the usually obscure panel had been deluged with more than 30,000 emails, hundreds of calls and requests from some 8,000 people to testify at its virtual public meeting. Some of the messages included threats to board members and staff.</p> <p>Keith Grellner, the chair of the Board of Health, said in an interview this week the heated blowback was based on "totally false" descriptions of the board's meeting agenda.</p> <p>"It's created confusion. It's created anger. It's created fear. And it is wasting a huge amount of government resources, time and money," said Grellner. "These people who put out this misinformation seem to relish in the chaos that they're creating."</p> <p>In addition to the phone calls and messages, a couple hundred protesters showed up Wednesday morning outside the Department of Health offices in Tumwater, just south of the state Capitol in Olympia.</p> <p>They raged at the nonexistent quarantine plot, as well as a real — but very early stage — study on whether to mandate coronavirus vaccines for children to attend K-12 schools. Some demonstrators waved signs comparing vaccine mandates to laws passed in Nazi Germany, and accusing Gov. Jay Inslee of tyranny and treason. Signs claimed state officials were setting up internment camps, with one referring to Joint Base Lewis-McChord as "America's Auschwitz."</p> <p>Rickey Hardy, of McCleary, Grays Harbor County, was holding a sign declaring "Impeach Adolf Inslee" and wearing a yellow star of David on his camouflage jacket, a symbol Nazis forced Jewish people to wear during the Holocaust.</p> <p>Hardy said he'd heard about the fake plans for quarantining vaccine refusers from "someone over the telephone" and added: "Google it. There's a lot of videos."</p> <p>The rally was led by Joe Kent, the Donald Trump-endorsed candidate seeking to unseat U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler in Southwest Washington's 3rd Congressional District.</p> <p>Kent hyped the rally against "COVID tyranny" and "forced quarantine" on Twitter to his 125,000 followers, with an image of a woman locked in a room with bars on the windows. He also appeared on former Trump adviser Steve Bannon's popular "War Room" podcast this week to promote the event.</p> <p>Jesse Jensen, a Republican challenging U.S. Rep. Kim Schrier, D-Sammamish, in the 8th Congressional District, fired off a press release condemning the health board's "Gestapo tactics to come into your home and detain you and your family."</p> <p>Doug Basler, a perennial Republican candidate running for the 9th Congressional District seat held by Bellevue Congressman Adam Smith, also sent a news release urging opposition to quarantines he compared to "Soviet-style lockdowns."</p>

At the rally, Kent claimed the board had changed its plans after public blowback, but board officials said that's false — the agenda was not changed — but the board did issue a statement seeking to clarify the agenda amid the tsunami of misinformation.

Kent said he understands the state wasn't about to "flip a switch" and start arresting people. But he said trust in government has been broken by two years of COVID-19 restrictions.

"They're exploiting and using the pandemic to take away our voices," he said. "This should be a public hearing at 6 or 7 o'clock in the evening so everyone can get off work and attend."

The board meetings are typically on weekday mornings.

Several members of the far-right Proud Boys group also attended the rally, which was addressed by Joey Gibson, the founder of the far-right Vancouver-based Patriot Prayer.

Gibson urged protesters to start showing up at the homes of local public health officials who are planning to create "concentration camps." He said demonstrators "should not commit any acts of violence — we're not at that point right now."

The Board of Health includes state Secretary of Health Dr. Umair A. Shah and nine volunteer members appointed by the governor — including physicians, epidemiologists and public health officials. Generally, the board serves as a public forum, prepares statewide health reports to the governor every other year and adopts a variety of health-related rules from school immunizations to disease reporting to environmental hazards.

Misinformation and misunderstandings

The misinformation about quarantines appeared to flow by either deliberate distortion or mere misunderstanding of existing powers granted to local health departments.

The health board agenda item that inflamed so many was about updating the state's codes to reflect the Legislature's passage in 2020 of [House Bill 1551](#), which generally modernized the state's control of communicable disease laws and was designed to limit the spread of HIV/AIDS and other serious or potentially fatal sexually transmitted diseases.

Under the law, a state or local public health officer can investigate someone if they have "reason to believe" the person has a serious, sexually transmitted disease and is knowingly putting the public's health at risk. If the health officer finds the allegations are true and the person continues to endanger public health, the officer can issue a health order requiring medical testing or counseling, or restricting certain behaviors for up to 12 months.

People under investigation can file an appeal and appear at a hearing in which only a Superior Court judge can order them into isolation or quarantine. Anyone who violates an approved health order could be guilty of a gross misdemeanor and receive up to a year of confinement or probation.

One Republican legislator said he sought to tamp down the false claims this week upon hearing an uproar from alarmed constituents.

"We need to make sure we squelch quickly the misinformation that anybody is going to go around and arrest anybody or detain anybody — certainly not an armed militia that is going to drag you out of your door," said state Sen. Jeff Wilson, R-Longview.

Thousands of participants joined the virtual board meeting Wednesday morning, many of whom appeared to still be confused about the day's agenda. One board staffer typed in the chat window that within the first two hours, more than 2,000 comments had poured into the meeting's Q&A chat window.

“There’s been some very inaccurate social media posts, which have been put out there falsely identifying a couple of topics that people claimed that we would be addressing today,” Grellner said when he began the meeting.

He repeated that the [agenda](#), which was posted online publicly last week, includes an update, not action, from the state’s immunization technical advisory group — [which formed in October 2021](#) to research whether a COVID-19 vaccine would meet all the scientific criteria needed to be added to the list of required K-12 immunizations.

The nine criteria address vaccine effectiveness, disease burden and implementation, meaning the advisory group is tasked with investigating the COVID shots’ efficacy and affordability, the morbidity of the disease and the reality of delivering and tracking shots.

The 18-person group, which has met once, remains early in its research process. Leading the research effort is board vice chair Dr. Tom Pendergrass and state science officer Dr. Tao Kwan-Gett.

Staff members are currently in the process of scheduling future meetings and compiling data from the state Department of Health, Samantha Pskowski, policy adviser for the Board, said in the Wednesday update.

The next few meetings are expected to convene between now and March, Pskowski said. Once the advisory group finalizes its recommendation, it will present its findings to the board at a future, regularly scheduled meeting.

“I just want to emphasize ... that this is just a single step in a multistep process. The technical advisory group is just that — it’s technical, focusing on the science and the data, and it’s advisory, meaning we’ll only make recommendations to advise the Board of Health,” Kwan-Gett said.

Pendergrass offered a reminder that adding a new vaccine is no slam-dunk — the board has turned down recommendations for vaccines in the “near past,” including vetoing a full requirement of the meningococcal vaccine.

While some education advocates, including the Seattle School Board, have come out in favor of a mandate for school COVID-19 vaccinations, Inslee has expressed doubts, saying recently he worries such a move would prompt many parents to pull their children out of schools.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration last summer [approved Pfizer’s COVID-19 vaccine for people 16 and older](#), making it the first of three COVID shots available in the U.S. to be upgraded from an emergency use authorization (EUA) to full approval.

For children aged 12 to 15, the vaccine can still be administered under an EUA, as well as third doses for certain immunocompromised individuals. The Johnson & Johnson and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines still await FDA approval but remain available for adults under an EUA.

In the interview, Grellner said he was disheartened by the largely misinformation-driven furor.

“It’s scary and sad. What’s even scarier and sadder, if it can be, is that, you know, people are so willing to accept this stuff as fact, and they won’t even take the time to look at information when it’s available to determine whether it’s true,” he said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 Officer in SPD ‘coordinating lying’ is rehired
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/an-officer-involved-in-seattle-polices-2020-proud-boys-hoax-was-rehired-last-month/

One of the Seattle Police Department officers involved in [coordinating lying](#) during a crucial moment amid 2020's racial justice protests subsequently left the department but was rehired last month, the department disclosed Wednesday.

The rehired officer took a prominent role on June 8, 2020, in transmitting fake radio chatter about a group of menacing right-wing extremists heading to confront protesters on Capitol Hill, according to an Office of Police Accountability investigation report released last week.

Meanwhile, [an email](#) has surfaced from earlier the same day that references a warning to nonpolice employees at the city about possible Proud Boys activity.

First reported by Omari Salisbury of [Converge Media](#) and by the [South Seattle Emerald](#), the email between Seattle Public Utilities employees on June 8, 2020, mentions "intelligence" about Proud Boys.

Some activists have described the radio chatter as part of a wider effort at the time by the Police Department to spread false information and undermine the protests. Officials Wednesday neither confirmed nor refuted a link between the email and the radio hoax.

Mayor Bruce Harrell spoke out Wednesday about the findings of the investigation into the hoax, calling the incident unacceptable and promising to work with the Police Department and the City Council on better oversight and controls.

"We will work with the council to look at what procedures need to be fixed, what processes need to be changed," Harrell said at a City Hall news conference, promising to consider tighter restrictions on deception by officers.

But [unanswered questions](#) about the Proud Boys hoax and OPA's investigation into the incident continued to swirl — and new information came to light.

An OPA report released last week identified six Police Department employees as having been involved in the radio chatter. Four of those employees subsequently left the department, the report by OPA Director Andrew Myerberg said.

Yet one of the employees who left, in September 2020, returned last month, Brian Maxey, the department's chief operating officer, said Wednesday. Neither the OPA report nor the Police Department have named the officer, who's referred to in the OPA report, Maxey said, as Named Employee #4.

In his report, which determined that the Proud Boys hoax had violated Police Department policies on discretion and truthfulness, Myerberg cleared Named Employee #4 and three other officers who took part in the chatter.

Though they demonstrated poor judgment, they lacked guidance and supervision, Myerberg concluded, sustaining allegations of policy violations against a captain who came up with the idea to transmit fake chatter and against an officer the captain tapped to oversee the effort. The disinformation alarmed protesters and inflamed tensions, Myerberg found.

City Councilmember Lisa Herbold, in a meeting Tuesday, pressed Myerberg on his findings, arguing he should have cited all six employees.

The case is supposed to be reviewed soon by interim police Chief Adrian Diaz for disciplinary rulings. Harrell announced Tuesday he's hired Myerberg as director of public safety in the mayor's office.

In November, then-Mayor Jenny Durkan signed an emergency order authorizing hiring bonuses of up to \$25,000 for police officers from other departments, citing a staffing shortage. Maxey said Named Employee #4 likely didn't receive a hiring bonus, being a returning officer, but couldn't immediately confirm that.

In the June 8, 2020, email now spurring questions, SPU's emergency manager, Chad Buechler, told SPU's general manager, Mami Hara, that he'd been asked by the director of the city's Emergency Operations Center (Office of Emergency Management staffer Kenneth Neafcy) and by the Police Department to not distribute certain information "further than operational needs." The Emergency Operations Center is a multi-agency hub used during times of crisis.

"SPD is preparing for a possible counter protest at Volunteer Park that could lead to significant volatility in the area. Intelligence reports that the Proud Boys may be active in the area," Buechler wrote.

The email was sent at 6:39 p.m. Earlier that day, the Police Department had abandoned the East Precinct. The Capitol Hill Organized Protest zone was forming by the precinct, which is located about a mile from Volunteer Park. The radio chatter investigated by OPA began at 9:14 p.m.

On Wednesday, Buechler said he couldn't remember exactly who had shared with him the information about the Proud Boys — a far-right group with a reputation for violence — and Volunteer Park. Members of the National Guard were reportedly [staged at Volunteer Park](#) on the evening of June 8, 2020.

Asked Wednesday whether the Police Department provided genuine or false information to the Emergency Operations Center, Maxey said he didn't know anything about the email and couldn't immediately answer the question.

Sgt. Randy Huserik, a Police Department spokesperson, declined comment, citing the department's in-progress review of the OPA report.

Buechler's email was not part of the OPA's investigation, Myerberg said. For the purposes of investigating the Proud Boys hoax, the OPA only searched for and reviewed emails to and from Police Department employees, Myerberg said.

"Given this, I don't know whether this email was connected with the later transmissions," Myerberg said.

Rumors about Proud Boys in Seattle started circulating on social media in the hours before the radio chatter investigated by OPA, with a few posts shortly before the SPU email mentioning scanner chatter about a reported sighting of Proud Boys at Volunteer Park.

Harrell recently asked Office of Emergency Management staff whether they were made aware of the Proud Boys hoax and was told they had not been, he said at his news conference, which mostly focused on potential policy changes. He said additional investigative steps could possibly be taken.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 More Seattle-area schools return to online
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/education/citing-covid-and-staff-shortages-more-seattle-area-schools-switch-to-remote-learning-cancel-classes/
GIST	<p>Staff shortages and the coronavirus continue to impact schools around the Puget Sound region. Because the situation is so fluid, many schools and districts are urging parents to check their schools' status each day.</p> <p>On Wednesday, Seattle Public Schools said in a flurry of tweets that Franklin High School would remain remote until Tuesday and Lowell Elementary until Jan. 20.</p> <p>Classes at Kimball Elementary were canceled Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Neither in-person nor remote instruction would take place, the school said, citing "staffing and student attendance projections." The school said administrators are working with district officials to determine when it can reopen. An update on Thursday will be shared as soon as possible, the school said.</p>

	<p>Bothell High School moved to remote learning on Thursday with in person classes paused until Monday, Jan. 24, according to the high school's webpage.</p> <p>Lake Washington, Redmond and Juanita high schools in the Lake Washington School District transitioned to remote learning earlier this week.</p> <p>The shortages are the result of COVID-related quarantines, general illnesses and other absences, the Lake Washington School District said on its website.</p> <p>Eastlake High School moved to remote learning Wednesday.</p> <p>Lynnwood High School will move to remote learning on Thursday and Friday and return to in-person learning on Jan. 18, following the long holiday weekend, the Edmonds School District said Wednesday.</p> <p>In a letter to Lynnwood High families, Principal Mike Piper said 15% of teachers and 30% of students were out due to illness</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Seattle mayor names new directors
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/seattle-mayor-bruce-harrell-names-directors-of-housing-immigration-refugee-affairs-public-safety/
GIST	<p>Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell on Tuesday announced additional department heads, naming three directors to oversee housing, public safety and immigrant and refugee affairs.</p> <p>Hamdi Mohamed was named director of the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs; Maiko Winkler-Chin was named director of the Office of Housing; and Andrew Myerberg is becoming director of Public Safety, a new position in the mayor's office.</p> <p>Mohamed, a King County Port commissioner, will serve Seattle's immigrant community, overseeing the office and its outreach.</p> <p>Winkler-Chin, who currently serves as executive director of the Seattle Chinatown International District Preservation and Development Authority, will lead the office that oversees the creation and maintenance of affordable housing as well as rent relief and similar initiatives.</p> <p>Myerberg, the current director of the Office of Police Accountability who fielded questions from City Council about a recent investigation into a 2020 police ruse by Seattle Police earlier Tuesday, will join Harrell's office as director of public safety.</p> <p>According to a news release, Myerberg will work with Senior Deputy Mayor Monisha Harrell to "develop new models of public safety, working collaboratively with Seattle Police and Fire Departments, and helping guide oversight and reform efforts."</p> <p>Harrell, who took office last week, expressed confidence in each of the appointees in the news release.</p> <p>The mayor appointed the majority of his Cabinet in December, including Monisha Harrell and two other deputy mayors.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Oregon deploys National Guard to hospitals
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/oregon-governor-deploys-national-guard-to-hospitals-amid-covid-surge/
GIST	SALEM, Ore. — Gov. Kate Brown is deploying Oregon National Guard members to help at hospitals that she says are under extreme pressure due to a COVID-19 omicron-fueled surge in hospitalizations.

	<p>A total of 1,200 Guard members will be deployed to more than 50 hospitals across the state, KATU-TV reported.</p> <p>“Fueled by the Omicron variant, current hospitalizations are over 700 and daily COVID-19 case counts are alarmingly high,” she said on Twitter, thanking Guard members, their families and their employers for this sacrifice and support.</p> <p>“As they step up yet again, I am asking all Oregonians to continue to do your part. Get vaccinated, get boosted, wear your masks, and stay home when you are sick,” Brown said.</p> <p>The Oregon Health Authority on Wednesday reported 47,272 new cases of COVID-19 from Jan. 3 through Jan. 9. That number is nearly six times higher than two weeks ago and three times higher than the August 2021 previous pandemic record for weekly cases, according to health officials.</p> <p>There were also 486 new COVID-19-related hospitalizations last week, which is a 68% increase from the previous week, health officials said.</p> <p>Oregon has yet to see the peak of the omicron surge, per Oregon Health & Science University projections. The state is projected to hit about 1,650 omicron hospitalizations in the last week of the month, before rapidly falling to pre-omicron levels, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported.</p> <p>State health officials also said Wednesday’s weekly outbreak report shows 128 active COVID-19 outbreaks in senior living communities and congregate living settings, with three or more confirmed cases and one or more coronavirus-related deaths.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	01/13 Omicron surge slowing East Coast cities?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/01/13/covid-omicron-variant-live-updates/
GIST	<p>The omicron surge seems to be slowing down in some East Coast cities, health officials and epidemiologists say, following promising trajectories in other countries.</p> <p>Positivity rates and case increases in New York are falling, Gov. Kathy Hochul (D) told reporters Tuesday.</p> <p>“They’re still high,” she said. “But I want to say that this is, to me, a glimmer of hope in a time when we desperately need that,” she said. Positive signs have been seen in Boston and Philadelphia, and forecasters predict similar trends across the Mid-Atlantic. The D.C. area peak could arrive as early as next week, according to public health experts.</p> <p>As the course of the virus has proved unpredictable, experts say it’s too soon to declare there will be a rapid decline in infections over these early data points, as was observed in South Africa and London. Last week official tallies in London showed cases were plateauing, leading health officials to say the city appears to be past its omicron peak. A week earlier, South African officials had said that country appeared to have passed its peak.</p> <p>Officials around the world have expressed hope that omicron’s high transmissibility and relative lack of severity would help the transition of covid-19 into a more manageable endemic disease. “We may be on the eve of a watershed, the transition from a pandemic phase to an endemic phase,” Alain Berset, the Swiss interior minister, told reporters on Wednesday, according to Bloomberg. He couched his remarks, though, saying it was too early to commit to a return to normalcy. “The situation remains difficult to predict,” he said. “We don’t know yet.”</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	01/12 DOJ: no compensation separated families
----------	------------------------------------------------------

SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/biden-separated-families-court-migrants/2022/01/12/5c592f74-725a-11ec-8b0a-bcfab800c430_story.html
GIST	<p>Two months after President Biden said migrant families separated at the border under the Trump administration deserve compensation, his administration’s lawyers are arguing in federal court that they are not in fact entitled to financial damages and their cases should be dismissed.</p> <p>The Justice Department outlined its position in the government’s first court filings since settlement negotiations that could have awarded the families hundreds of thousands of dollars broke down in mid-December.</p> <p>Government lawyers emphasized in the court documents that they do not condone the Trump administration’s policy of separating the children of undocumented migrants from their parents. But they said the U.S. government has a good deal of leeway when it comes to managing immigration and is immune from such legal challenges.</p> <p>“At issue in this case is whether adults who entered the country without authorization can challenge the federal government’s enforcement of federal immigration laws” under federal tort claims laws, the Justice Department said in a Jan. 7 brief in a lawsuit in Pennsylvania. “They cannot.”</p> <p>The legal strategy reflects the Biden administration’s awkward position as it shifts from championing the migrant families politically to fighting them in court. Migrant families have filed approximately 20 lawsuits and hundreds of administrative claims seeking compensation for the emotional and sometimes physical abuse they allege they suffered during the separations.</p> <p>The motions to dismiss the cases were filed in a pair of lawsuits in Pennsylvania and California. Lawyers for the families said they expect the Justice Department to take a similar stance in other cases.</p> <p>“The moment they said they were going to back away from settlement negotiations, this is where they were headed,” said Conchita Cruz, co-executive director of the Asylum Seeker Advocacy Project, which is representing migrants in similar lawsuits. “If the government wants to actually win these cases, then they do have to argue that the families aren’t eligible. That’s what is so shocking.”</p> <p>Bree Bernwanger, a senior attorney at the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights of the San Francisco Bay Area, who is representing three families in the Northern California case, said the Justice Department’s efforts to dismiss their lawsuit is “incredibly hypocritical.”</p> <p>“They’ve come to court making fundamentally the same legal arguments as [President Donald] Trump,” she said in an interview.</p> <p>The White House referred questions on the legal filings to the Justice Department, which declined to comment.</p> <p>But while immigrant advocates and liberals are likely to be furious at the administration’s position in court, some Democrats say privately that it has a political upside. The image of the administration fighting against the large payments, they say, could blunt GOP arguments that the administration is too soft on immigration.</p> <p>The Trump administration separated more than 5,500 children from their parents at the border in an effort to deter mass migration and punish families that crossed into the United States, according to government figures. Trump officials also defended the government against the migrants’ lawsuits and fought unsuccessfully to dismiss two of the cases in Arizona.</p> <p>Biden, in contrast, blasted the family separations on the campaign trail, declared the separations a “human tragedy” after taking office and created a task force to reunite families that remain apart. The family separation policy was widely unpopular, and Biden’s sharp criticism of it was a central way he sought to distinguish his immigration policy — and his administration’s worldview — from Trump’s.</p>

Once he became president, Biden's Justice Department negotiated with the families' lawyers for eight months in an effort to settle the families' legal claims. But talks stalled last month after the Wall Street Journal reported that the government was in talks to pay individuals as much as \$450,000 each.

Republicans quickly expressed outrage, saying people who crossed the border illegally should not be receiving such hefty payments at taxpayers' expense. Biden himself initially dismissed the Journal report as "garbage," but he later said he was referring only to the size of the prospective payments — and that he thought the families deserve compensation for the suffering they endured.

"If in fact, because of the outrageous behavior of the last administration, you were coming across the border, whether it was legal or illegal, and you lost your child — you lost your child — it's gone — you deserve some kind of compensation, no matter what the circumstance," Biden said in November. "What that will be, I have no idea."

But that leaves the administration at a precarious crossroads between political pressures and legal realities. While talks broke down amid an outcry over the potential size of the payments, courts could hand down even bigger damage awards, and once in court the administration faces pressure to use all the legal tactics at its disposal.

Most of the migrants' lawsuits had been on hold during the eight months of negotiations, as lawyers for both sides initially said they were making progress toward a settlement.

But now the two sides have returned to a fully adversarial posture. "So we're back alive," Judge Edward G. Smith told the lawyers in the Pennsylvania case Thursday.

Justice Department attorney Veronica Finkelstein told the judge that both sides had been "getting to a place where there might be a framework agreed upon" when "there just became a complete impasse."

"We certainly remain open to further settlement negotiations in the future," she said.

No such talks seem imminent, however. The government said in its motions to dismiss the lawsuits that the migrants' claims are "not compensable."

The legal dispute centers on whether the migrants can sue the government, mainly under the Federal Tort Claims Act.

Congress can create exceptions for individuals to sue the government for specific reasons, but it did not do so in this case, the Justice Department says.

Government lawyers wrote that the families "cannot prevail" against the government even if the family separation policy was a bad one that had "profoundly negative effects."

"The government does not defend the merits of the policies at issue in this case, which have now been repudiated," Justice Department lawyers said in a filing in the California case.

One client, identified by the pseudonym "Erendira C.M." to protect her privacy, said she was separated from her then-6-year-old daughter in 2018 after fleeing Guatemala to seek asylum in the United States. Erendira said she met with Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas in August and that he "told us that it was his job to support us after what we suffered."

"I feel betrayed and deeply sad now that they're fighting us in court," she said in a statement released by her lawyers.

The Department of Homeland Security referred questions to Justice, which is handling the litigation under Attorney General Merrick Garland.

	<p>DHS spokeswoman Liza Acevedo said the agency is working to reunite families who remain separated, regardless of what happens with the lawsuits. Officials also have provided families with counseling, “humanitarian parole” to stay in the United States for three years, and permission to work legally, she said.</p> <p>If the cases are not dismissed, the Justice Department has asked the judges to transfer the cases to the border states where the migrants crossed into the United States. Lawyers for the families oppose the move, saying those courts are far from where the migrants live now.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	01/12 Paying more range of necessities
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/01/12/inflation-food-gas-housing-healthcare/
GIST	<p>Rising prices on a variety of goods and services have lifted inflation to its highest level in 40 years. Inflation is a big threat to the economic recovery, and the Biden administration has vowed to prioritize bringing prices down.</p> <p>Backed-up supply chains, combined with booming demand from shoppers, drove the U.S. consumer price index up 7 percent in December from a year earlier.</p> <p>“We’re seeing inflation across the board, but it’s been extraordinarily high for necessities like food, energy and health care,” said Leah Hartman, a finance and economics lecturer at the University of New Haven in Connecticut. “By this point, it’s hitting everybody.”</p> <p>This round of persistent inflation — the first in decades — is raising alarm bells even among those who thought price increases would be temporary. Many economists say families will probably see a lasting mark on household budgets, as well as the broader economy, even if supply-chain disruptions ease later this year.</p> <p>“The causes of inflation are temporary,” said Laura Veldkamp, a research fellow for the National Bureau of Economic Research and an economics professor at Columbia Business School. “But the consequences, we’ll be living with for a long time.”</p> <p>Here are four areas where everyday Americans are being impacted.</p> <p>Food</p> <p>Every category of food — including fruits and vegetables, bread and dairy — has become more expensive in the past year as the industry confronts rising energy and transportation costs, along with mounting labor shortages. The most pronounced increases have been in meat, fish and egg prices, which are up 12.5 percent, in part because of higher grain costs, as well as a shortage of refrigerated trucks and the truckers to drive them. Overall grocery prices have risen 6.5 percent since last year.</p> <p>“It comes down to labor and transportation,” Hartman said. “We all go to the grocery store and say, ‘What is going on? Chicken is a dollar a pound higher.’ And it’s because that chicken is caught in the global supply chain.”</p> <p>Julie Bourne, 29, a freelance content strategist in Brooklyn, says she’s begun noticing that many of her go-tos at the supermarket have gotten more pricey, prompting her to rethink what she buys.</p> <p>During a grocery run this week, she was “shocked” to see a small container of Sabra hummus priced at \$6.50. Bourne passed up pork sausage, which had gone from \$4 to \$7.50, opting instead for a small package of chicken drumsticks that cost \$4.81.</p> <p>“It makes me nervous because I’ve got to pay for these groceries, and I have to be prepared for rent to go up,” said Bourne, who quit her full-time job to go freelance in late 2020 but is reconsidering her decision. “The reality is setting in that everything has swung higher.”</p>

Gas and energy costs

In one of the most visible instances of inflation, gasoline prices have skyrocketed 50 percent in the past year, according to the Labor Department.

Although the average price per gallon — about \$3.31 — is still below November's record of \$3.44, that figure has started inching back up in recent weeks following growing unrest in Kazakhstan and other oil-rich nations, said Patrick De Haan, head of petroleum analysis for GasBuddy.

"After seeing a little bit of relief, gas prices have been back on the rise for the last two weeks," he said. "But for all the complaining about higher gas prices, it does not seem to have had a negative impact on consumption. Americans are still filling up at the pump."

In Akron, Ohio, Carla Hurt says she's begun consolidating trips to doctor's appointments and cutting back on unnecessary errands to save money on gas. Hurt, who is 62 and uses an electric wheelchair, is on a fixed income and lives with her 83-year-old mother and college-age son.

"When you've got three people existing on \$2,500 a month, it doesn't take much to throw you out of whack," she said, adding that her monthly heating bill easily totals \$500 in the winter. "We make sure that every trip in the car is utilized to its fullest."

Economists say it's also costing more to heat homes this winter, as prices for natural gas, propane, electricity and heating oil continue to tick up. Americans who rely primarily on natural gas to heat their homes — nearly half of U.S. households — are expected to spend 30 percent more than they did last winter, according to [projections](#) from the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

Housing

It's no secret that home prices have soared during the pandemic. Median home prices jumped to a record \$362,800 in June, according to the National Association of Realtors, as Americans across the country looked for larger, more spacious places to ride out the pandemic.

But now as people return to city centers, rents are also ticking up, especially in large urban areas. Economists say they expect those higher costs to factor more heavily in overall inflation numbers, which are calculated based on the going rate of home rentals. Overall housing prices rose 4.1 percent last year, Labor Department data show.

The expiration of pandemic-related rent controls and assistance programs are also likely to lead to higher rents, according to Vikram Kumar, an economics professor at Davidson College near Charlotte.

"A lot of leases expired at the end of the year, so as those get adjusted we're going to start seeing even bigger increases in rents," he said. "It's going to have a large impact."

And while prices of most products can waver in both directions, that's not usually the case in the housing market, where annual contracts and long-term mortgages make it more difficult for prices to come back down once they rise.

Health care

Two years into the pandemic, the health-care industry continues to struggle with too little supply — of both workers and goods — and overwhelming demand. As a result, medical care costs have begun ticking up.

So far those price increases have been modest — about 2.5 percent in the past year — though economists say they expect that rate to pick up in coming months as the omicron variant continues to weigh on the sector.

	“There’s an enormous strain on the health care system at every point — nurses are burned out, lots of people are showing up with covid in addition to other needs,” Veldkamp of Columbia Business School said. “That shows up as higher prices for everything.”
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Cruise crews isolate on quarantine ships
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2022/01/12/cruise-crew-quarantine-ships/
GIST	<p>While some of the world’s largest cruise lines are scrambling to manage coronavirus outbreaks onboard, at least two companies are offloading crew members who test positive onto ships that are sailing without any passengers.</p> <p>Two industry giants, Carnival Cruise Line and Royal Caribbean International, say they are transferring workers to crew-only ships to wait out their isolation periods. The movement of crews has raised eyebrows among some passengers, who have documented transfers of more than 100 workers. Neither cruise line would disclose to The Washington Post how many employees are staying on quarantine ships.</p> <p>“To keep our crew and ships as healthy as possible, we have been using out-of-service ships for our crew members who are asymptomatic and mildly symptomatic, and in isolation after testing positive for COVID-19,” Royal Caribbean spokeswoman Lyan Sierra-Caro said in an email.</p> <p>Three other major cruise lines did not immediately respond when asked if they were employing similar practices. One passenger on a P & O Cruises ship in the Caribbean told The Post last week that he and his wife were being moved to a ship operated by Cunard Line after testing positive for the novel coronavirus. Both companies are owned by Carnival Corp.</p> <p>Four Royal Caribbean ships are being used as quarantine vessels for crew members: Vision of the Seas, Rhapsody of the Seas, Serenade of the Seas and Jewel of the Seas. Carnival is using at least two ships: Carnival Ecstasy and Carnival Sensation.</p> <p>This past week, Royal Caribbean canceled sailings for three ships — Serenade, Jewel and Symphony of the Seas — for periods ranging from a few weeks to a couple of months; the return of Vision of the Seas to regular cruising was postponed to March 7.</p> <p>Royal Caribbean’s Sierra-Caro said the employees who tested positive are monitored by the ships’ medical team during the course of their 10-day quarantine and then return to their assigned ships. She said this week that no crew members have had serious symptoms or needed to be hospitalized.</p> <p>Chris Chiames, a spokesman for Carnival, said in an email that “virtually all crew” who are quarantined do not require medical attention.</p> <p>“But there are physicians and medical staff on board all ships for immediate care, and then we would always transport to a hospital in an emergency,” he said.</p> <p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which has allowed ships to operate under a “conditional sailing order” since last year, allows cruises to run dedicated quarantine ships. Spokeswoman Caitlin Shockey said in an email that operators need to isolate confirmed cases in single-occupancy cabins with private bathrooms.</p> <p>“If the ship does not have enough space to isolate and quarantine their crew, they should have a protocol for managing these cases, which might include transferring crew to offshore locations or other ships,” she wrote.</p> <p>A passenger on Harmony of the Seas whose young daughter tested positive for the coronavirus posted a video on TikTok under the name “Cruising With Covid” and said that more than 100 crew members were</p>

transferred. When someone replied with an allegation that it was fake, the passenger included more of his footage — set to the theme of “Titanic.”

Some industry critics say the transfers amount to a shell game that allows cruise lines to keep numbers lower on ships that are visiting ports — making it more likely those destinations will allow the ships to dock.

“There’s no question in my mind that this started because they wanted to keep their ships operational and going in and out of the ports of call,” said Jim Walker, a Miami-area lawyer who sues cruise lines — often on behalf of crew members — and runs the Cruise Law News website.

He has written about the “plague ships,” a term he says crew members have used with him, several times on the website and wondered whether the ships have adequate medical staffing to handle the patients. Walker reported more than 3,700 infected crew members between three of the ships, but that number could not be independently verified. Royal Caribbean declined to provide numbers or address that report despite several requests.

Walker said he suspects that the cruise lines are also trying to save money by housing some coronavirus-positive crew members on ships instead of in hotels on land and are avoiding what could be more expensive medical care in the United States. The cruise companies did not provide a statement on those allegations, but Chiames said crew members might not be authorized to stay in hotels in some locations.

As numbers of positive cases have soared in recent weeks, some destinations have refused to let cruise liners dock with infected passengers or crew members.

“Decisions by local destinations to deny entry can be somewhat arbitrary based on both the local public health situation in combination with the status of cases on board,” Chiames said.

Sierra-Caro said Royal Caribbean works in partnership with each destination its ships visit and provides a medical declaration with any positive cases on board before arriving.

A former Royal Caribbean crew member, who resigned when informed he would be moved to a quarantine ship after testing positive for the coronavirus in late December, said he believed the practice was an effort to “massage” covid numbers, although he never heard the company say that explicitly.

“They’ve got a covid problem,” he said. “But they’re manipulating the numbers to make it look like they don’t have a covid problem.”

The former crew member, who spoke on the condition of anonymity out of concern about future job prospects, said the transfers were just one issue plaguing ships’ crews. He said he had interacted with passengers who were not properly using their masks and witnessed inconsistency from his employer in applying quarantine requirements. He said that one close contact, a supervisor, did not quarantine after he tested positive.

“The morale is just terrible,” he said.

Sierra-Caro said that Royal Caribbean is operating with an “enhanced face mask policy” and that the operator’s “detailed action plan” calls for close contacts of anyone who tests positive to quarantine in their stateroom for 24 hours before being tested for the virus.

Despite a thirty-onefold increase in cases on cruise ships in the past two weeks of December compared to the previous two weeks, the CDC plans to let its restrictions on sailing expire Saturday. At that point, the rules will become recommendations for cruise lines to follow voluntarily.

The agency recently warned against cruise travel, even for those who have been vaccinated.

	<p>CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said during a Senate hearing Tuesday on the response to the omicron variant that the agency would continue to provide oversight, technical assistance and support for ships following the order. She praised the industry's collaboration with the CDC.</p> <p>"We anticipate that this order will not be renewed and that the cruise ship industries will continue to understand that this is a really safe practice for those industries," she said. "What I can't predict is what the summer will bring."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Students question value of college degrees
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/news/2022/01/wa-and-beyond-students-question-value-college-degrees
GIST	<p>WINTHROP, Okanogan County — When the afternoon bell rang, Autumn Edwards, a high school senior in Washington state's Methow Valley, on the eastern slope of the Cascades, rushed out of class to her 1997 Ford F-150 pickup truck — and to her job at a ranch.</p> <p>She was tasked with slaughtering a sheep and a goat, then gutting them. The day had begun with barn chores. The weekend before, she had skinned 12 pigs. "If there was no school, I would work from morning until evening," said Edwards. Her goal? To own a ranch (she's designed a logo) and a million acres.</p> <p>This young woman, with her scuffed cowboy boots and her striking confidence, is plenty ambitious. Yet ask her about college and she is clear: "I don't plan on it," she said. What's more, Beth Anderson, the college and career adviser with the Methow Valley district, is not pushing it.</p> <p>Many high schools, said Anderson, "like to promote the fact that 100% or 95% are college-bound." Such data points are not barometers of success, she argued, because they are more about "sending students off to the next institution" than helping them work through individual needs, skills and desires. Are people ready to rethink what "success" looks like? And how to help students achieve it?</p> <p>For teens across the country — many of them burnt out, confused or newly questioning long-held plans — that conversation is coming alive. It is unfolding amid scrutiny of the cost and value of a college degree and the multiplying options for alternative training.</p> <p>The march to college is getting pandemic-adjusted. More students are taking gap years. Others feel they "don't need college to be successful," or don't want to go until they know what to study, said Marguerite Ohrtman, director of school counseling and clinical training at the University of Minnesota. Some have lost ground academically. Others have earned certifications and want to use them. The pandemic has also driven some students to work more hours at jobs, earning money that remains critical to families.</p> <p>"There are students who frankly are not ready to go to college and pay thousands of dollars" or take out hefty loans, said Ohrtman. Yet, she said, "there is still a push from school leaders that 'we want 100% of our students to apply to college.' "</p> <p>The situation has school counselors feeling stuck, said Mandy Savitz-Romer, a senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and expert in school counseling.</p> <p>"We celebrate kids who get into college; we do not celebrate students who choose work," said Savitz-Romer. She added that "we can't just now pivot to choosing careers" without giving counselors time and support to have those conversations with students — a challenge compounded by caseloads that have counselors responsible for scores or even hundreds of students.</p> <p>The college-for-all push, originally a response to criticism that counselors were the gatekeepers to college access, was embraced more than a decade ago as "a really easy standard to hold ourselves to." Now, it may be overshadowing the complex needs of teens.</p>

“What happened is we jumped to this place of helping students apply to college and skipped over the entire exploration process — ‘What do I want to do? How do I want to contribute?’ ” Savitz-Romer said. “There is no process of discovery. It is, ‘Here, apply to college.’ ”

Students are pushing back. Early data from the [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#) shows college enrollments down this fall for the second year in a row. Earlier this year, a survey of teens by the [ECMC Group](#) and VICE Media found that more than half believed they could be successful without a four-year college degree. (The ECMC Foundation, an affiliate of the ECMC Group, is among the many funders of The Hechinger Report.)

A [report](#) in October by the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University found that more education generally yields higher earnings — but not always.

The report shows that 37% of workers with a high school diploma have higher earnings than half of those with some college. What subjects people study, what fields they enter, even geography all matter in determining income, said Anthony Carnevale, director of the center and a co-author of the report.

A key, little-discussed factor, said Carnevale, is how well suited a person is to a job. “It is all about the match,” he said. “Where people are successful and have good earnings, it has to do with their own personal work interests and personality.”

That idea — finding what someone is good at and enjoys — is shaking up the adult labor market. (A record [4.4 million Americans quit their jobs](#) in September.) The pandemic also shuffled students’ perspectives, said Jill Cook, executive director of the American School Counselor Association. Disruptions to school routines led students to more work and community experiences, she said, at the same time that they saw “reports about folks who have left their jobs” asking, “What is a good fit? What is bringing them joy and making them happy?”

At Osseo Senior High School, which serves 2,100 students about 30 minutes northwest of Minneapolis, senior Dayo Onanuga joined several other students on a recent morning in a beige-wallpapered conference room and shared that she had long planned to be a surgeon.

But a year of online school changed that. “I was burnt out from the pandemic,” she said. Onanuga reasoned that if her energy was flagging now, “I probably cannot manage surgery” and years of training. Rather than give up the field — the pandemic highlighted for her “the injustices and struggles” faced by health care workers — she is now considering health care administration.

As it did for many students, the pandemic also forced Onanuga to manage her time and become more independent. She now also worries less about what others think of her choices or how she reaches her goals. “I kind of stopped caring about permission,” she said. “At the end of the day, nobody else is going to work this job until retirement but me. I should be happy. It can’t be something that I work two years, and then I hate it.”

Her classmate Kenji Lee had a similar revelation. Someone drawn to puzzles who has “math homework in my backpack all the time,” Lee planned to study engineering but admitted he “was just doing school to do school.” Then he got his driver’s license and discovered cars.

“Cars make me happy. Cars are fun,” he said. “I love working on cars, I like driving cars, anything to do with cars.” He now plans to attend a technical college to focus on engines for cars, boats or motorcycles. Adults tell Lee he won’t earn a lot, which makes him “double-check myself, ‘Do I really want to do this?’ ” But he concludes: “‘Yeah, I do.’ ”

While some high school students know what they want to do, many do not. Carnevale from Georgetown said the average age at which people “land in an occupation” — [earning the median wage for workers of all ages](#) — has risen from the mid-20s in the 1970s to the early 30s now.

“The journey is a lot longer,” he said. One reason, said Carnevale, is that the labor market now demands more specific skills. Students are especially anxious about spending to acquire skills they don’t end up using. Osseo senior Mila Phethdara said her mother earned a nursing degree, “realized she hated it,” then worked in insurance.

“My mom wants me to figure out what I want to do and stick with it. She doesn’t want to waste money,” said Phethdara, who is interested in the dental field. Still, she said, “I worry that I will switch out of it. That is an ongoing fear.”

It’s easy to see why many students feel pressure around education and career choices. A Georgetown [report](#) published in October showed that from 1980 to 2019, average college costs rose 169%, while earnings for those aged 22 to 27 rose only 19%. Some jobs don’t seem to justify the education costs.

Yusanat Tway, a sociology major at the University of Minnesota, wants to go to law school, then do human rights advocacy. “It will cost \$200K” to get a law degree, she said. (The [median salary for a lawyer](#) is \$126,930, but varies widely.) Tway, a first-generation college student, also has family financial expectations to think about: “Because my parents are immigrants, I am their retirement plan,” she said.

One big problem, said Carnevale, is a dearth of guidance to help students relate their interests, education and training to potential work. “There is a kind of missing link in this relationship between people and their work values, work interests, personality traits, then linking that to education and then linking that to training and then linking that to jobs,” he said.

In recent years, Career and Technical Education has been included in state graduation requirements and high school curricula in order to address this exact issue. It is far different from old vocational education (candlesticks in metal shop, anyone?) and can yield certifications, community work experiences and awareness. (What did you learn about client confidentiality in that health care course? What interested you?)

In Minnesota, the Greater Twin Cities United Way works with 17 school districts that have developed career pathways offering students of color and those with low incomes job exposure, college credits and training. The stated goal: jobs paying at least \$25 an hour and zero college debt. Sareen Dunleavy Keenan, senior program officer of Career Academies, which connects schools and employers, said it takes coaching to change both how employers consider young talent — as in rewriting entry-level job descriptions and paying to train young people, not just older workers — and how students view “success.”

“Previously, it was ‘A four-year degree is a ticket out of here,’ ” she said. “Now we want people to stay in their communities.” She pitches “wealth creation,” which in this context means helping students forge pathways to high-wage local jobs (with “an upward career trajectory”), while they use college credits in high school, Pell Grants and employer tuition programs to pay for education, rather than acquiring debt.

Keenan said the 10-year project (the United Way is halfway through it) challenges schools to focus less on college applications and instead help students build a career “where they don’t need two, three jobs or a side hustle.” And to do it through local relationships.

The approach may make sense. But the pandemic canceled many in-person experiences for students — and threw them off track. A school year “when you do almost nothing” was tough, said Hamza Mohammed, a senior at Humboldt High School in St. Paul, Minnesota.

He had planned to take calculus now but can’t because he didn’t feel comfortable taking precalculus online last year. Mohammed likes computer science, “but I haven’t shadowed anyone,” he said. “What I really need at this point is more career-based education.”

Hannah Chan, career pathways coordinator with the St. Paul district, sitting across from Mohammed in a Humboldt High conference room, was herself a first-generation college student and understands the setback of missing key exposures.

“I hear you loud and clear that because of COVID you couldn’t have these experiences,” she said to Mohammed. Many low-income first-generation students, she said, “only know the careers around them.”

The pandemic also surfaced issues of identity, community and social justice, which are especially keenly felt in Minneapolis, said Derek Francis, manager of counseling services at Minneapolis Public Schools. He said staff members had set up food drives in school parking lots as the pandemic hit. “We became community support, right off the bat,” he said of counselors. And, he asked, “What else has happened here?” referring to the murder of George Floyd.

Students are back, but the world has changed. As counselors, he said, “we want to make sure we are not missing out on college and career” planning. But, said Francis, “We have to talk about race and inclusion.” Many students, he said, “have been beaten up physically and emotionally” and now ask, “Why would I want to go to college?”

Francis spoke while at a school counselors’ gathering in a brewery outside Minneapolis, the in-person social piece of the Minnesota School Counselors Association’s virtual two-day conference. Counselors described students missing credits and falling behind academically, and talked about students feeling uncertain. “Our high fliers are still applying to college,” said one, but fewer “are feeling the pressure to apply soon.”

A counselor from South High School in Minneapolis said she had just written a letter of recommendation for a student who “is involved in, like, 50 organizations,” from social justice to climate change. The pandemic and social unrest have spurred activism and artistic and creative efforts, she said.

Education and work experts say it is too soon to tell if we are on the cusp of deep cultural change in how our education system guides students from school to work and life — wherever they come from.

Among the graduates of Osseo Senior High School’s Class of 2021, 20% went right to work, up from 11% just five years earlier. Jacqueline Trzynka, a school counselor, said that a few years ago the school began celebrating students once they declared a post-secondary plan — not necessarily college — with an orange T-shirt that read “I’M IN.”

This year, counselors are paying close attention to how they speak to students. Rather than focus on being “college ready,” they urge figuring out what interests students, then finding out how and where to pursue it.

“We are really conscious of not making it all about four-year [institutions] in our presentations, on our website, our materials,” she said. The aim is “to make students feel that whatever they choose is valued.”

In some places, expectations can be hard to unwind, said Edward Pickett III, a board director of the National Association for College Admission Counseling and a dean and college counselor at Polytechnic School, a private school in Pasadena, California.

“Success looks different for every person,” said Pickett, a former admissions counselor at Tufts University. Well-off parents at his school, he said, “have worked to have these resources, so they want to make sure they pass it along to their kids.”

	<p>To the parents, that often means having a child attend an elite school and pursue a high-paying profession. At the same time, the pandemic offered counselors “this opportunity to reflect” on the need “to present different opportunities” to students, said Pickett, himself a first-generation college student.</p> <p>He sees more students planning gap years. Opal Hetherington, a senior at Polytechnic, hopes to spend next year on a farm. She is rethinking a previously scripted path in which “I was choosing to go to college because I am going to a college preparatory school and that is what we do,” she said.</p> <p>She is still applying to college. But her onetime plans to major in political science now bend toward religion and thoughts of homesteading. Where she once “thought I was certain about things,” Hetherington said she now wants “to experience what happens to me.” She added, “I don’t want to always be living in a planning stage.”</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	01/12 Parents of youngest kids wait for vaccine
SOURCE	https://www.wired.com/story/as-omicron-surges-parents-of-the-youngest-kids-endure-an-agonizing-wait/
GIST	<p>HINA TALIB FELT she had an understanding of Covid—or at least as much as any one doctor could have. She was accustomed to seeing it: She is a pediatrician, and an attending physician who directs a postdoctoral fellowship at the Children's Hospital at Montefiore in the Bronx. She is an associate professor at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. She has abundant experience talking about Covid: She is a spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatrics and a public health influencer with 53,000 followers, a position that brought her to the White House in November to discuss child vaccination with Jill Biden.</p> <p>And she is a mom, parenting two kids in Manhattan with her husband—which gave her a whole new perspective when her preschooler daughter, who had just turned 4, developed a fever, and tested positive for Covid. It was two weeks after the Omicron variant was identified and just a few days before the holidays began. Talib and her husband were vaccinated and boosted, and their 5-year-old son had recently gotten his second shot. Still, “a tsunami of Omicron hit our household,” she says. She and both kids ended up getting sick. (Her husband showed no symptoms, she says, and his rapid tests were negative.)</p> <p>Weeks later, all three have recovered from what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention would consider mild cases—which is to say no one needed to visit an ER or had breathing problems that required hospitalization. Nevertheless, their lives were disrupted: As first one and then another positive test retriggered the 10-day countdown to safety, their family isolation period stretched to a month. The more lasting disruption, Talib says, is to her own sense of certainty and control. “I had been so cautious,” she says ruefully. “I’m a frontline pediatrician; I take care of people with Covid. I take the subway. I live in dense New York City. Yet I’d been able to keep Covid out of my home. And then all of a sudden it’s parading around my bedroom and sneezing and jumping on my bed.”</p> <p>Talib and her family were not vulnerable because their luck ran out, nor merely because Omicron is so transmissible that it turns epidemic curves into lines that go straight up. The gap in their family’s armor was their daughter being one year too young to be vaccinated. Like millions of other US families, they balanced the benefit of her going to preschool against the risk of her becoming infected, knowing the tool that protected the rest of the household was not yet available for her. And, like millions of other families with very young kids, they were distressed they could not do more.</p> <p>“As each age cohort of children were able to get these vaccines that are so amazing, their parents were able to make a different risk-benefit decision and feel in control,” Talib says. “But the parents of littles have been left out. The risk thinking has been really hard for parents who would have otherwise vaccinated but didn't have that option.”</p> <p>Children have long been considered the population least vulnerable to severe Covid illness, but Omicron has changed the game. The American Academy of Pediatrics, which publishes regular analyses of Covid data, said last week that cases among US kids “are increasing exponentially” and have tripled since</p>

Christmas. Almost 8.5 million people younger than 18 have tested positive since the pandemic began, the organization said, but more than 10 percent of those cases occurred in the past two weeks.

“Pediatric hospitalizations are at the highest rate compared to any prior point in the pandemic,” CDC director Rochelle Walensky said Friday in her first solo [media briefing](#) in months. In kids too young to be vaccinated, [according to data](#) from the US Department of Health and Human Services, the rate of hospitalization went from 2.5 per 100,000 to more than 4 per 100,000 since mid-December, compared to a steady 0.6 per 100,000 in 5- to 11-year-olds.

In kids 5 years old and up, the narrative that Covid—and especially Omicron—produces mild illness may have undermined [demand for the vaccine](#). As of January 7, according to the CDC, just over half of 12- to 17-year-olds are fully vaccinated, and 16 percent of 5- to 11-year-olds are. Those low rates may be responsible for Omicron’s increasing burden on kids overall: The highly-contagious virus finds a home in the unvaccinated and doesn’t discriminate between “not vaccinated yet” and “not allowed to be.”

The option of vaccinating the youngest kids won’t be available for a few months more. In December, Pfizer—the only manufacturer whose vaccine has been approved for children and teens—[announced](#) that the regimen tested in clinical trials for kids younger than 5 appeared inadequate. The initial two-dose regimen, each containing a tiny amount of antigen (3 micrograms, one-tenth the dose adults receive), produced an adequate immune response in children 6 to 23 months old but not in children 2 to 4 years old. Following an external review, company officials said they would study the effect of a third dose, administered two months after the second one.

The addition of that third shot would make the vaccine for the youngest children more like the regimens given to everyone else: effectively a three-dose series, two plus a booster. (The FDA and CDC approved adding a routine booster for 12- to 17-year-olds [last week](#).) But the need to test that third dose will push authorization of the youngest kids’ vaccine back down the calendar. Principal investigators in the Pfizer trial sites estimate that it can’t come before April. If a three-dose series is authorized, the youngest kids [might not be fully protected](#) until summer vacation starts.

Pfizer’s reevaluation is aimed at achieving the best result for the youngest children: doses that are small enough to avoid side effects and cumulatively produce a durable immune response. Investigators agree that’s the goal. But many of them have children of their own, and they feel the anguish of parents who want to better protect their kids right now.

“I have actually been fielding a lot of calls from really desperate families who are at their wits’ end,” says Yvonne Maldonado, a pediatrician and professor of epidemiology and population health at the Stanford University School of Medicine, and principal investigator of the Pfizer vaccine trial there. “I don’t have great answers. It’s frustrating and it is frightening.”

It’s some comfort, she points out, that so far Omicron appears to produce mild symptoms in many kids—though whether the variant is truly mild in all individuals or only blunted in population-level studies by more widespread immunity remains to be untangled. “The likelihood that a child will be hospitalized is well under 1 percent,” Maldonado says. “But still, it’s not zero. Where we work, we’ve seen lots of children come into the hospital with respiratory failure or, at the very least, respiratory distress where they need to be on oxygen. That can be really distressing to families. And we don’t know what the long-term consequences of having Covid are going to be in adults or kids.”

The rise in kids’ case numbers has also made it harder to manage the return to school for the spring semester. “Our school district set a metric of 5 percent positivity, and in one day back almost all the schools reached that metric,” says Kawsar Rasmy Talaat, a physician and associate professor of international health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, where she leads a trial of the Pfizer vaccine for kids 12 and under. “Just because of the sheer numbers of people getting infected with Omicron, we’re seeing a huge increase in the number of children also being affected and hospitalized.”

Nationwide, the school picture is chaotic. In the week beginning January 2, 5,409 US schools [switched to remote learning](#) on at least one day, according to the tracker Burbio, which aggregates more than 80,000 K–12 calendars. Schools in [Atlanta and five Georgia counties](#) returned to classrooms Monday after a delayed start to the year, while ones in the [Twin Cities and suburbs](#) went remote to protect students. In New York City on Tuesday, students staged [a citywide walkout](#) to protest for social distancing and remote options, and in Chicago, the teachers’ union [agreed to end](#) a five-day walkout over safety concerns. In northern Virginia, parents reported [receiving pleas](#) to stand in as substitutes, and in Michigan, a teacher [tweeted](#) about schools missing [entire grade levels](#) of staff.

Parents constantly think about risk, whether that’s when introducing their kid to solid food, letting them climb a stepladder, or deciding whether to send them to school during a bad flu season. But thinking through the risks of Covid is uniquely challenging, because official advice has seemed to shift so often—and because, in addition to the vaccine, new treatments like [antiviral pills](#) and monoclonal antibodies aren’t yet available to younger kids.

“The common cold and flu and RSV are known entities,” says Jennifer Shu, an Atlanta pediatrician in private practice and medical editor of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ [parent advice site](#). “We have some remedies, including antivirals approved for the flu. Whereas for Covid, even though there are multiple medicines, many of these are not approved under the age of 12. So they’re not even an option for children.”

And if children cannot be vaccinated, the only option left is to create a protective bubble around them. “I would make sure that everyone around your child is vaccinated and boosted, if possible: Parents, older siblings if they are eligible. Teachers, other adults, day care providers,” Talaat says. “It requires the stuff that we have been doing for almost two years now. Though it’s getting a little old, I am sure.”

But what happens if, despite everyone’s best efforts, your pre-K kid gets infected? In the early days after her daughter tested positive, when she was trying to prevent transmission to the rest of the family, Talib was shocked to discover how far the official advice on managing Covid infections at home diverged from what was actually possible with such a young child. The family wore masks during the day, but it wasn’t practical to sleep in them, and the daughter would sneak into her parents’ room at night. Talib could try separating the kids and staggering their mealtimes, but with the whole family isolating, the kids were each other’s only playmates. And though she could [hide in her bedroom](#) once her own symptoms started, letting her husband manage the kids, “you cannot isolate a 4-year-old,” Talib says. “The guidance we have right now does not speak well to the situation of having a 0- to 4-year-old and ongoing household exposure.”

It may be the last, longest frustration of the pandemic: The cohort that we feel the greatest evolutionary impulse to shield turns out to be the one that takes the longest to protect.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 Iran re-imprisons French academic
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/12/iran-sends-french-iranian-academic-back-to-jail-at-key-point-in-nuclear-talks
GIST	<p>Iran has sent back to prison from house arrest French-Iranian academic Fariba Adelkhah, a shock development in the midst of delicate talks on the Iranian nuclear drive.</p> <p>Adelkhah was sentenced in May 2020 to five years in prison for conspiring against national security, accusations her supporters have always denounced as absurd. She was allowed home in Tehran in October 2020 with an electronic bracelet.</p> <p>The French foreign ministry expressed “astonishment” at Adelkah’s reimprisonment on Wednesday, calling for her immediate release and adding the move had come with “no explanation or preliminary warning”.</p>

“The decision can only have negative consequences on the relationship between [France](#) and Iran and reduce confidence between our two countries,” the foreign ministry said.

She is one of at least a dozen western nationals believed to be held in [Iran](#) who activists say are being held as hostages at the behest of the elite Revolutionary Guards to extract concessions from the west.

With talks under way in Vienna aimed at salvaging the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers, the French foreign ministry warned the move would damage bilateral relations and trust.

“It is with great shock and indignation that we have been informed that Fariba Adelkhah ... has been re-imprisoned in the prison of Evin” in Tehran, the committee set up to support her said in a statement.

“The Iranian government is cynically using our colleague for external or internal purposes that remain opaque, and that have nothing to do with her activities,” it added.

The committee accused the authorities of “deliberately endangering Fariba Adelkhah’s health and even her life”, pointing to the death this month in Iranian custody of poet Baktash Abtin after he contracted Covid.

The surprise move by the Iranian authorities to move Adelkhah back to prison comes at a hugely sensitive juncture in talks involving France and other world powers aimed at reviving the deal on the Iranian nuclear programme.

France’s foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, complained on Tuesday that the pace of the talks in Vienna is “too slow”, in marked contrast to the more upbeat tone from officials in Tehran.

Also being held in Iran is Frenchman Benjamin Briere, who his family describe as an innocent tourist but was detained while travelling in May.

Briere’s family announced last month he had begun a hunger strike to protest at his detention conditions and the lack of evolution in his case.

A specialist in Shia Islam and a research director at Sciences Po university in Paris, Adelkhah was arrested in June 2019 along with her French colleague and partner Roland Marchal.

[Marchal was released in March 2020 in an apparent prisoner swap](#) after France released Iranian engineer Jalal Rohollahnejad, who faced extradition to the United States over accusations he violated US sanctions against Iran.

Adelkhah’s support group said she had been imprisoned “on trumped-up charges and without any proper trial”.

Nationals of all three European powers involved in the talks on the Iranian nuclear programme – Britain, France and Germany – are among those foreigners being held.

In a separate development on Wednesday, the British Council said its staffer, Iranian citizen Aras Amiri, had [returned to the United Kingdom after being cleared on appeal](#) of a 10-year jail sentence for “cultural infiltration” in Iran.

The 2015 deal – agreed by Iran, the United States, China, Russia, Britain, France and Germany – offered Tehran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme.

But then US president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the United States in 2018 and reimposed biting sanctions, prompting Tehran to begin rolling back on its commitments.

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-7-inflation-today-is-far-different-than-in-1982-11642012166?mod=hp_lead_pos2
GIST	<p>Consumer price inflation in December, at 7%, was last this high in the summer of 1982. That’s about all the two periods have in common.</p> <p>Today, the inflation rate is on the rise. Back then, it was falling. It had peaked at 14.8% in 1980, while Jimmy Carter was still president and the Iranian revolution had pushed up oil prices. Core inflation that year reached 13.6%.</p> <p>Upon becoming Federal Reserve chairman in 1979, Paul Volcker set out to crush inflation with tight monetary policy. In combination with credit controls, that effort pushed the U.S. into a brief recession in 1980. Then, as the Fed’s benchmark interest rate reached 19% in 1981, a much deeper recession began. By the summer of 1982, inflation and interest rates were both falling sharply. Four decades of generally low-single-digit inflation would follow.</p> <p>“We have had dramatic success in getting the inflation rate down,” one Fed official observed that August. But Mr. Volcker had other problems to contend with: His high interest rates had pushed Mexico into default, touching off the Latin American debt crisis, and unemployment would climb to a post-World War II high of 10.8% that fall.</p> <p>Unemployment took out that record in the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Since then, it has been falling rapidly as the economy roars back thanks to vaccines, fewer restrictions on mobility and ample fiscal and monetary stimulus. In December, unemployment sank to 3.9%, closing in on the 50-year low of 3.5% set just before the pandemic.</p> <p>Monetary policy then and now couldn’t be more different. Back in 1982, the Fed was still targeting the money supply, causing interest rates to fluctuate unpredictably. Today, it largely ignores the money supply, which expanded dramatically as the Fed bought bonds to hold down long-term interest rates. Its main policy target, the federal-funds rate, is close to zero.</p> <p>Rather than 1982, two previous episodes when inflation reached 7% might hold more useful lessons for today. The first was in 1946. The end of the war had unleashed pent-up demand for consumer goods, and price controls had lapsed. Inflation reached nearly 20% in 1947 before falling all the way back. Today, consumption patterns have similarly been distorted and supply chains disrupted by the pandemic.</p> <p>Inflation also topped 7% in 1973. Although driven in part by food and energy (that fall, Arab exporters would embargo the U.S. for supporting Israel in the Yom Kippur War), this was a continuation of a rise that began in 1966. Like today, the 1960s increase followed a long period of low, stable inflation and low unemployment.</p> <p>Like President Biden today, President Lyndon Johnson initially blamed inflation on industry-specific microeconomic factors. Then-Fed Chairman William McChesney Martin, in part due to pressure from Johnson, was late to recognize that demand was too strong and that the public’s expectations for inflation were coming unanchored.</p> <p>A key challenge facing current Fed Chairman Jerome Powell is deciding whether today’s inflation has more in common with 1946 or 1966. For now, he sees a bit of both. On Tuesday, he blamed inflation on “strong demand and also supply constraints” and emphasized the risk of expectations coming unanchored. The Fed could start raising rates in March.</p> <p>Mr. Powell also has things his predecessors lacked, namely the knowledge of their experience and a free hand from the president, who has just nominated him to a second term.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Omicron surge cause rise in severely ill?
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/will-record-omicron-cases-cause-a-surge-in-the-severely-ill-scientists-look-for-signs-11641996003?mod=hp_lead_pos7
GIST	<p>The Omicron variant accounted for 98% of Covid-19 cases in the U.S. last week, based on estimates released by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Tuesday. The variant has fueled a rapid rise in infections since reaching the U.S. late last year, surpassing surges associated with earlier versions of the virus and almost eliminating Delta.</p> <p>So far, the rate of hospitalizations associated with Omicron doesn't appear as high as with prior variants, lending support to early studies indicating Omicron might be less severe than other variants. However, the sheer number of Omicron cases has led to the seven-day average of new hospital patients with confirmed or suspected Covid-19 cases running above last January's record highs.</p> <p>Omicron was first declared a variant of concern by the CDC on Nov. 30, 2021. At first, cases were clustered in New England and a few other northeastern states like New York and New Jersey. The virus has since spread widely. In the two weeks since Christmas Day, most states have experienced a significant rise in infections.</p> <p>Scientists are trying to determine how much this unprecedented wave of infections will translate into higher levels of serious illness, hospitalizations and deaths, as they have observed with earlier surges of the virus.</p> <p>Clinical and laboratory studies suggest that Omicron might produce less severe disease than other variants. Preliminary public health data partially bears this out. While new U.S. cases and hospital admissions have surpassed levels seen in last winter's peak, ICU stays, an indication of the most severe illness, so far remain below these levels.</p> <p>Because there is a lag between when a person catches Covid-19 and potentially becomes severely ill or dies, it may take more time to fully assess Omicron's effects.</p> <p>Countries that were affected by Omicron early may offer some clues as to how the outbreak may play out in the U.S.</p> <p>In South Africa, where Omicron was first detected in November, cases rose in earnest for about a month before peaking. Hospitalizations remained relatively low during this period, as did deaths.</p> <p>South Africa has a relatively young population. Because young people tend to have more mild cases of Covid-19, the country's experience with Omicron may not serve as a representative model for the U.S.</p> <p>Omicron was first detected in the U.K. just before it was in the U.S. While Covid-19-related hospitalizations are up in the country, instances of the most severe outcomes, in which patients require ventilators, remain below levels seen in previous surges.</p> <p>The U.K. has higher Covid-19 vaccination rates than the U.S. About 70% are fully vaccinated compared with 62%. This added protection may help tamp down more severe cases.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	01/12 Federal govt. deregulates 'French dressing'
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-u-s-federal-governmentderegulates-french-dressing-11642036962?mod=hp_featst_pos5
GIST	<p>The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is tossing its definition of French dressing.</p> <p>On Wednesday, the agency said it is revoking the "standard of identity" for the salad topping. Its decision brings a helping of deregulation to the ingredients required for French dressing, a move requested decades ago by an industry trade group that called the FDA's standard of identity outdated.</p>

Among the surprising elements of the news is the fact that the federal government bothered to define French dressing at all—and that it stood for decades. “It just seems like a complete throwback to another time,” said John Birdsall, an award-winning food writer and author of “The Man Who Ate Too Much,” a biography about James Beard.

When the FDA established its standard 72 years ago, French dressing was one of just three dressings recognized by the agency. The other two were mayonnaise and “salad dressing.”

According to the original 1950 standard, a French dressing should include vegetable oil, and a vinegar and/or lemon or lime juice, and could be seasoned with ingredients such as salt, sugar, tomato paste or puree, and spices such as mustard or paprika. In 2022, the French dressing perhaps best known to Americans has a more creamy texture, sweet flavor and red or orange composition. There’s not much that’s French about it.

The Association for Dressings and Sauces, a trade association representing salad dressing, mayonnaise and condiment manufacturers, petitioned the FDA to revoke the rule in January 1998. The restrictions on what constitutes a French dressing inhibited what could be created to match the desires of French dressing consumers, the petition argued.

Many different types of salad dressings—Italian, Ranch, Caesar and Blue cheese—were available for consumers and not affected by the same kind of standardization, the organization said.

“The French dressing standard simply restricts innovation,” the trade association said once again in a written statement Wednesday.

One year ago, the FDA “proposed to revoke the definition and standard of identity for French dressing.” This week it is doing just that, saying the standard—which had been amended a few times since 1950—“no longer promotes honesty and fair dealing in the interest of consumers.”

More than 20 comments about the proposed rule were submitted from trade and business associations and individuals. Many supported the rule change. Others misinterpreted it to mean it would eliminate the use of the name “French dressing” altogether.

“Food products with the name French dressing will continue to be available to consumers,” the FDA said in response, according to its filing with the Federal Register, set to publish Thursday.

Another comment, the FDA said, questioned why the federal agency was prioritizing this proposal at all. The FDA said the move is related in part to the agency’s efforts to modernize food standards so that the industry can innovate and produce healthier foods. The agency is also required by law to re-examine its regulations.

The FDA doesn’t use the standards of identity as a tool very often currently, said Diana R. H. Winters, deputy director of the Resnick Center for Food Law and Policy at the University of California, Los Angeles School of Law. And this change in particular may not have a huge impact on what products are available on the shelves already.

“It seems like the industry’s already been pushing at the edges of this standard of identity,” Dr. Winters said. “You’re not going to see an actual big difference.”

She found a 1940s advertisement for the salad topping, and shared it on the Resnick Center’s social-media accounts Wednesday.

The decadeslong delay between the petition to change the standard of identity and the actual rule change is frustrating, she said. “It shows both the workings of the FDA—that its wheels are turning, but extraordinarily slowly and in a way that is somewhat inexplicable,” she said.

	<p>The FDA didn't respond to questions about the decades gap between the request for a revocation and the rule change.</p> <p>Back in the 1950s, James Beard argued a proper French dressing was closer to what would now be referred to as a vinaigrette, with oil, vinegar, salt and pepper, Mr. Birdsall said.</p> <p>"Mastering the Art of French Cooking," Julia Child's first cookbook, describes a French dressing as a sauce vinaigrette—declaring Worcestershire, curry, cheese and tomato flavorings aren't French additions and sugar is heresy, Mr. Birdsall said.</p> <p>"Without actually specifically calling out the American style of French dressing, which is sweet and tinged with tomato, this is not at all what a French dressing actually is," he said.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	01/12 Omicron tests China 'zero-Covid' strategy
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-puts-chinas-zero-covid-strategy-to-its-toughest-test-11642003293?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1
GIST	<p>Over the past two years, China has used some of the strictest measures anywhere to keep Covid-19 out and long succeeded in holding numbers down. But as Omicron poses the biggest challenge since the start of the pandemic, the country is looking more boxed in by its own formula.</p> <p>Beijing has repeatedly pointed to Western countries where the virus has run rampant as cautionary examples. But as the Omicron variant spreads inside China ahead of February's 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, an uncomfortable reality is setting in: The country's ability to keep the virus at bay has meant low levels of natural immunity. Vaccination rates are high, but how effective Chinese vaccines are against Omicron remains in question.</p> <p>China has held fast to its "zero-Covid" strategy despite a mounting toll on its people and economy, and as other countries have moved away from lockdowns. The highly contagious Omicron variant will be harder to manage, health experts say, likely leading to more frequent and longer-lasting restrictions.</p> <p>"Covid-zero is great when you're at zero, but when you're not, it can become very disruptive to the community," said Ben Cowling, chair professor of epidemiology at the University of Hong Kong's School of Public Health.</p> <p>Central-government authorities show no intention of changing their approach to Covid-19, which they continue to see as a success amid the Omicron surge, according to officials familiar with the government's thinking. Beijing is concerned that any relaxation in controls could lead to a big breakout of coronavirus cases, given the relatively low efficacy of Chinese vaccines and remaining pockets of unvaccinated people in the countryside, some of the officials said.</p> <p>"An outbreak would put a huge strain on the country's resources," said one of the officials, referring to China's limited healthcare facilities, especially in rural areas.</p> <p>On Sunday, authorities in Tianjin—a port city a half-hour from Beijing by high-speed train—said they had found two locally transmitted Omicron infections. A day later, two people some 300 miles away in Henan province were linked to the same transmission chain.</p> <p>The discoveries kicked off a now-familiar choreography: lockdown, mass testing and warnings of further restrictions to come.</p> <p>Tianjin suspended train and bus service to Beijing and on Wednesday embarked on a second round of testing everyone in the city of 14 million. Henan has closed most schools and banned public gatherings,</p>

including temple fairs and other celebrations ahead of the Lunar New Year. Several local governments in the province of 99 million have issued stay-at-home orders.

Under President Xi Jinping, China has [veered toward a more top-down approach](#) to any issue, and local officials, fearful they might be punished if they let Covid-19 gain a foothold, tend to err on the side of aggressive interpretation of the central government's policy instructions.

The strains the resulting measures are putting on communities throughout China were on display in the city of Xi'an, whose 13 million people have been ordered to stay in their homes for almost three weeks. Some complained of a lack of access to food. The account of a [woman losing her unborn baby](#) after waiting outside a hospital for hours for lack of a valid Covid-19 test sparked a wave of anger online in response to the harsh measures.

Two other Xi'an women told similar stories online, while others said family members with chest pain had faced deadly delays, incidents that seemed to mark a turning point in the public's patience with inflexible zero-Covid policies. The confusion around access to healthcare prompted a rare and direct public admission of wrongdoing. At a news conference, Liu Shunzhi, head of Xi'an's health commission, bowed in apology to residents. "We feel deeply sorry," he said.

Xi'an's lockdown is one of the biggest since the sealing off of Wuhan in early 2020, and one of many [carried out across China](#) since the start of the pandemic. Ruili, a town of about 200,000 on China's border with Myanmar, has endured at least four lockdowns in a little more than a year, with residents spending months at a time in isolation. In October, more than 30,000 visitors were [locked in Shanghai Disneyland](#) and forced to undergo Covid-19 testing after one visitor tested positive.

Economists are increasingly citing the potential for Omicron to take a greater toll on China's slowing growth this year, as restrictions and spreading infections keep many from work and make others reluctant to spend.

In a Jan. 3 note, Eurasia Group called China's zero-Covid policy—and its possible failure to contain infections—its top risk for the year, saying that continuing in the same way would lead to greater economic disruptions, more state intervention and a more dissatisfied population at odds with the narrative propagated by state media that China has defeated Covid-19.

[China's recent Covid-19 flare-ups](#) are prompting factory closures and clogging up ports, heightening fears of global supply disruptions. The world's third-busiest container port of Ningbo-Zhoushan, near Shanghai, risks worsening backlogs after more than two dozen Covid-19 infections were confirmed in the surrounding area. In August, [the port was temporarily closed](#) after the detection of a single case.

China isn't facing any easy choices. About 86% of its population have been fully vaccinated, but the vaccines most widely used, developed by Sinopharm and Sinovac, use inactivated virus. Those are widely believed to be less effective against Omicron infections than the mRNA vaccines developed by [Moderna](#) Inc. and by [Pfizer](#) Inc. with [BioNTech SE](#).

A Sinovac spokeswoman referred to a preliminary study published in December that showed that three doses of its vaccine provided some protection against Omicron but two were less effective. The study, which hasn't been peer reviewed, was based on blood samples of 120 participants in China. Sinopharm couldn't be reached for comment.

Zhong Nanshan, China's top Covid-19 expert, who has defended the zero-Covid policy, said last week that in theory China has reached herd immunity through its high level of vaccinations. He acknowledged that Chinese vaccines have been less protective against Covid-19 compared with mRNA vaccines but said that based on studies involving the Delta variant, they are still able to limit severe disease. He said that around 24% of people in China have received a booster shot.

China is accelerating its efforts to produce domestic mRNA vaccines and medicines for Covid-19, said an official familiar with the matter.

China has reported a total of 104,189 Covid-19 cases, and 4,636 deaths from the virus. China tallies both symptomatic and asymptomatic cases but includes only the former in its official count of confirmed cases. One model from Peking University late last year projected that new daily cases could top 600,000 if China were to abandon its zero-Covid strategy.

Some health experts said that China could potentially address Omicron with different mitigation measures because Omicron generally causes less-severe disease, China's vaccination rate is high and doctors there, as world-wide, now have better information about how to treat Covid-19.

"The world is in a different stage of the pandemic," said Tulio de Oliveira, director of South Africa's Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation. He referenced the experience in South Africa, which emerged from a recent surge in Omicron cases with manageable outcomes.

Even if China were willing to take the risk, managing public perceptions in a country used to living in the relative safety of the bubble the harsh restrictions have created would be tricky. "State and social media have been focused on highlighting the threat of the virus and at times exaggerating how serious the problem has been in Western countries," said Yanzhong Huang, a senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Observers say that if China were to pivot away from its zero-Covid strategy, it would likely be after the Winter Olympics, which close Feb. 20, and before a Communist Party congress on a yet-to-be-disclosed date in the fall. China's leaders would likely try to engineer the shift without what is known as an exit wave, such as the surge in infections now seen in countries such as Australia.

Before then, Beijing is taking no chances, setting up a "closed loop" around the events and going as far as warning residents not to try to assist Olympic vehicles even if they are involved in a road accident, and instead wait for authorities to respond, because of Covid-19 controls.

That intense focus on stamping out Covid-19 cases at all costs is what is concerning people such as a Xi'an man locked down at home, with the oranges he stockpiled when the restrictions were announced weeks ago now starting to rot. He is in his 30s and identified himself by his surname, Zhang, and is supportive of the overall Covid-19 policies but has concerns about the use of one yardstick for every outbreak.

"Without the lockdown and control measures, the situation would have been much worse than now," he said. In the first days of Xi'an's lockdown, he could still see from his window people walking their dogs. "But all of a sudden, the local government shifted to a one-policy-fits-all mode: Everything was about Covid control, without considering special circumstances at all."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 Seattle extends eviction moratorium
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3309546/mayor-harrell-extends-seattle-eviction-moratorium-another-30-days/
GIST	<p>Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell announced Wednesday that he will be issuing a 30-day extension of the city's eviction moratorium.</p> <p>The city-level moratorium on residential and commercial evictions was initially set to expire on Sept. 30, 2021. Then-Mayor Jenny Durkan later extended it to Jan. 15 in the wake of the delta variant-fueled surge in COVID-19 cases. A statewide moratorium expired at the end of July 2021, while a "bridge" period for renters and landlords expired two months later.</p> <p>Citing a recent rise in COVID-19 cases, Harrell said he believes another extension is a necessary step toward providing relief for renters in the near-term.</p>

	<p>“As this rapid surge in cases driven by the omicron variant drives further pandemic uncertainty, keeping vulnerable people in their homes must be the immediate focus,” he said in a Wednesday press conference. “Over the next month, we will continue to track changing conditions and seek improved metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of the moratorium and aligned policies. Our actions will continue to be driven by data and our values, focused on preventing a rise in homelessness and supporting the tenants and small landlords most in need.”</p> <p>In addition to the extension — which will now have the eviction moratorium extend through Feb. 14 — Harrell is also forming an “interdepartmental team” to manage the distribution of rental aid to both tenants and small landlords, which will include a new online portal.</p> <p>Over the next 30 days, Harrell says Seattle “must go further to pursue the most effective methods of support” for members of the community.</p> <p>“I am directing city departments to use the next 30 days to urgently and comprehensively collect and analyze needed data around the pandemic’s effect on the housing crisis and impact of the eviction moratorium, improve accessibility and delivery of assistance resources, and prepare targeted outreach to tenants most at-risk of eviction,” he vowed.</p> <p>Seattle City Light and Seattle Public Utilities are also being directed to continue offering flexible payment plans, and will not shut off utilities for nonpayment until April 15. For parking, a suspension of booting vehicles for unpaid parking tickets will be extended “until further notice.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Kittitas Co. criticizes WSDOT refusal
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3309838/kittitas-county-wsdot-refused-help-clearing-snow-lack-of-vaccine-mandate/
GIST	<p>Kittitas County leaders revealed Wednesday that the Washington State Department of Transportation refused assistance to clear snow from roadways in the region over the county’s lack of a worker COVID-19 vaccine mandate.</p> <p>According to a press release from the county, the state’s own vaccine mandate saw WSDOT terminate 48 employees who were previously tasked with “maintenance and snow removal in Kittitas County.”</p> <p>Days after the arrival of significant snowfall in early January, the county’s Department of Public Works says it “offered assistance [to WSDOT] to clear State roadways,” and that its offer was refused “due to Kittitas County not mandating the COVID-19 vaccination for County employees.”</p> <p>County leaders were critical of WSDOT’s decision in statements sent out this week.</p> <p>“During these times, we need to be able to put differences aside and work to support one another,” County Commissioner Laura Osiadacz said. “It needs to be neighbors helping neighbors and lending a hand to get the work done.”</p> <p>“This county is ready, as always, to put all hands on deck to solve this problem,” Commissioner Cory Wright added. “It’s time for logic and leadership to overcome ideology and allow skilled equipment operators working alone in their cabs to get this job done.”</p> <p>Earlier in the week, WSDOT head Roger Millar told state lawmakers that the state’s worker COVID-19 vaccine mandate did not impact efforts to clear snow out of mountain passes (including Snoqualmie Pass, which is located along the county line between Kittitas and King counties).</p> <p>In a statement posted to Twitter on Wednesday, WSDOT provided additional details, describing how Kittitas Public Works had “reached out about clearing State Route 903 near the small town of Ronald in unincorporated Kittitas County.”</p>

	<p>“County crews informed WSDOT that they could not meet the vaccination declaration required of all interlocal agreements and contracts with Washington state agencies,” the statement reads. “With county crews not being an option to work on the state road, WSDOT secured a private contractor to clear the roadway with work beginning Wednesday morning, Jan. 12.”</p> <p>The contractor hired by WSDOT is providing it with additional dump trucks, excavators, and bulldozers.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Fears of Russia invasion Ukraine rise
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/12/fears-ukraine-invasion-rise-russia-talks-fail-reac/
GIST	<p>Fears rose Wednesday that Russian President Vladimir Putin is intent on invading Ukraine, as U.S. and NATO talks with Russian officials failed to produce a commitment from Moscow to draw down its major troop buildup along the border with the developing U.S.-aligned democracy.</p> <p>The Biden administration and top NATO officials sought to put a positive spin on the high-stakes talks. Analysts warned that the Kremlin has exploited meetings this week in Brussels and Vienna to buy time to prepare for a move against Ukraine.</p> <p>Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman, head of the American delegation, told reporters that U.S. and NATO officials stood firm in rejecting key Russian security demands for easing tensions over Ukraine, but left open the possibility of further talks with Moscow.</p> <p>The special meeting in Brussels was the first gathering in more than two years of the so-called NATO-Russia Council, which is designed to prevent clashes between the alliance and Moscow. Ms. Sherman framed it as a “remarkable expression of the power of diplomacy.”</p> <p>Still, with the Russians refusing to back down from demands that NATO remove troops and equipment from former Soviet republics that border Russia, the meeting ended with a “sober challenge from the NATO allies” for Moscow to embrace a diplomatic solution to the escalating standoff, Ms. Sherman said.</p> <p>She bluntly acknowledged that she did not know, after multiple days of talks with Russian officials, whether or not some 100,000 Russian troops massed on the border would invade. “Is this about invasion? Is this about intimidation? Is this about trying to be subversive?” Ms. Sherman said. “I don’t know, but it is not conducive to getting to diplomatic solutions.”</p> <p>NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said Russian and NATO officials held a “serious and direct exchange” and that the Western military alliance still has deep concerns about the Kremlin’s policy but hopes for more talks to ease the crisis.</p> <p>Four-hour session</p> <p>The NATO-Russia Council met for four hours, slightly longer than budgeted. Mr. Stoltenberg said it was a good sign that the two sides were talking directly after weeks of threats and brinkmanship that have raised concerns along Russia’s western border.</p> <p>“Our differences will not be easy to bridge, but it is a positive sign that all NATO allies and Russia sat down around the same table and engaged on substantive topics,” he told reporters in Brussels.</p> <p>Concerns have been growing for months that Mr. Putin is looking to expand on his gains of 2014, when Russia forcibly annexed the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine. The former Soviet republic has a pro-Western government and for years has been the scene of tense geopolitical wrangling between Moscow and the West.</p>

“The reason there’s a crisis is because we’re seeing about 100,000 Russian troops on the border with Ukraine, with, of course, echoes of the events of 2014 and 2015,” said Simon Miles, a Russia expert at Duke University’s Sanford School of Public Policy.

“Those troops are engaging in not only just massing in significant quantities, they’re engaging in live-fire exercises — that is, practicing war,” Mr. Miles said Wednesday in a virtual briefing for journalists. “And we’re seeing information operations, disinformation and things like that emanating from this massive Russian presence.”

At the same time, Mr. Miles said, it is not clear whether Mr. Putin will order an invasion. “I don’t think even [Russian diplomats] know what Putin’s ultimate end game is,” he said.

He added that the Russian security establishment widely shares Mr. Putin’s frustration with NATO’s expansion.

“Russian leaders are unhappy with the growth of NATO ever eastward,” Mr. Miles said. “They’re unhappy with this because it’s humiliating, I think it’s fair to say, to a lot of Russians, not just in the Kremlin. It also calls into question some of their serious security concerns over defending their own territory.”

Russian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Grushko emerged from the meeting Wednesday expressing doubts about NATO’s claim that it is a purely defensive grouping that poses no direct threat to Russia. He said Moscow will respond in kind to any NATO attempt to contain or intimidate Russia.

“If there is a search for vulnerabilities in the Russian defense system, then there will also be a search for vulnerabilities in NATO,” Mr. Grushko said, according to Reuters. “This is not our choice, but there will be no other path if we fail to reverse the current very dangerous course of events.”

He said Moscow was ready to talk more with NATO about such issues as weapons deployment and verification measures, but the Kremlin would not allow its broad set of security proposals to be cherry-picked.

Russian Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin told the Russian Interfax news agency that NATO’s “ignoring” of Russian security proposals creates the risk of “incidents and conflicts.”

The NATO meeting was one of a trio of extraordinary diplomatic meetings this week aimed at heading off a shooting war in Ukraine, where Russia has been escalating its support of a pro-Moscow separatist movement fighting the Western-backed government in Kyiv.

U.S. and Russian diplomats conferred directly Monday in Geneva. The Organization for Security and Economic Cooperation in Europe, which includes Russia and Ukraine, is scheduled to discuss the crisis Friday in Vienna.

The Biden administration has said it is willing to discuss Russian concerns about the rising militarization of border areas across Eastern Europe, but it has rejected out of hand a Moscow demand that former Soviet states such as Ukraine and Georgia be forever barred from full NATO membership.

Mr. Putin has indicated that he also wants NATO to withdraw its troops and military equipment from all countries that border Russia, including Ukraine and NATO allies Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Ms. Sherman told reporters that some of Mr. Putin’s security demands “are simply nonstarters.”

Mr. Stoltenberg said NATO’s 30 member countries are united against Russia’s more sweeping demands. He expressed hope for more talks with Russia on European security issues but said that depended on Mr. Putin.

	“NATO made it clear in the meeting that we are ready to schedule a series of meetings addressing a wide range of different topics, including missiles and reciprocal verifiable limits on missiles, in Europe. From the Russian side, they made clear that they are not ready,” the NATO leader said.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Switzerland cuts quarantine, isolation times
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/12/swiss-cut-self-isolation-quarantine-times-as-omicr/
GIST	<p>GENEVA (AP) — Switzerland’s government is halving the self-isolation times required of people who test positive for the coronavirus and the quarantine times required of people they were in contact with, to five days.</p> <p>The Federal Council, the seven-member executive branch of Swiss government, made the decision Wednesday and in a statement noted intensive-care admissions are lower in the pandemic since the emergence of the omicron variant worldwide over the last two months.</p> <p>The decision to shorten the isolation and quarantine periods, from 10 days previously, results from shorter times between infection and transmission of omicron compared to earlier variants, the government said. The ability of Swiss regions to trace contacts has come under increased pressure as case counts, and thus people affected by isolation and quarantine, has risen sharply.</p> <p>“The epidemiological situation is critical and remains difficult to assess: Hospital admissions and occupancy of intensive care units have fallen in recent weeks despite a surge in the number of cases,” the government said.</p> <p>However, the council cautioned that while omicron is less dangerous for vaccinated and recovered people, a surge in hospitalizations in the country is still expected given a huge spike in case counts and an increase in positive tests among people admitted to hospital “even though they were not admitted due to COVID-19.”</p> <p>That requires isolating more people, which makes care in hospital more complex, and threatens to sideline more staff members who test positive too, it said.</p> <p>Bracing for possible staff shortages, the eastern Swiss region of Graubunden on Wednesday said it could order any trained nurses and some other health care specialists who are not currently practicing to go to work if hospitalizations surge. It cited a clause of Swiss law allowing for such a mandatory call-up in health emergencies. Trained personnel at higher risk of severe COVID - such as the elderly - would be exempt.</p> <p>The federal council, meanwhile, said it too could “act swiftly” if necessary by closing businesses or institutions and capping attendance at public events, as it has done repeatedly in the past during the ebb and flow of the pandemic.</p> <p>The country of about 8.5 million people reported more than 32,000 cases of COVID-19 over the last 24 hours, among the highest figures it has recorded during the pandemic. A total of 16 people died of COVID-related causes over the last day, raising the total death toll to 12,047.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Industry: oil-gas crackdown drives up price
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/12/energy-industry-blames-bidens-oil-and-gas-crackdow/
GIST	<p>President Biden’s crackdown on the oil-and-gas industry is driving soaring energy prices, and Build Back Better will only push costs higher, according to the American Petroleum Institute.</p> <p>In his 2022 State of American Energy address Wednesday, API President Mike Sommers said the U.S. position is strong, but that “we begin 2022 with Americans viewing energy and its cost as major concerns.”</p>

“This is in part because lately, we’ve seen policies aimed at restricting production and delivery of U.S. natural gas and oil,” Mr. Sommers said in the virtual event hosted by the nation’s leading oil-and-gas advocacy group.

He cited President Biden’s day-one cancellation of the Keystone XL pipeline, the administration’s leasing moratorium on federal lands and delays over infrastructure improvements, such as the battle over replacing the Enbridge Line 5 pipeline in Michigan.

“Meanwhile, with inflation soaring to historic levels, we’ve seen proposals in Congress for a targeted tax increase for natural gas, and even further restrictions on American energy development,” Mr. Sommers said. “These decisions exacerbate Americans’ concerns and put upward pressure on their energy prices.”

Build Back Better, the Democrats’ \$2 trillion climate and social spending bill, includes fees on methane emissions that the industry says will ultimately hit consumers in their pocketbooks.

The measure passed the House in November but remains stalled in the Senate after Sen. Joe Manchin III, West Virginia Democrat and a key swing vote, said last month he could not support it.

“Natural gas prices are going up because we’re in the middle of a cold winter, and there have been restrictions on supply that have come as a consequence of some of the policy decisions that have been made by this administration,” Mr. Sommers said. “We’re focused on reversing those policy decisions but at the same time, we have to stop this natural gas tax because that would just mean higher prices for American consumers.”

The API’s message came with the Biden administration’s ambitious climate change agenda facing political headwinds over higher prices and the pump and the thermostat.

The U.S. Energy Information Administration forecast that U.S. homes using natural gas will spend 30% more on heating in the 2021-22 winter, while those heated with electricity will spend 6% more, following “changes to energy supply and demand patterns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.”

The national average cost for a gallon of regular gasoline on Wednesday was \$3.30, an increase of \$1.01 from the same date last year, according to the AAA.

Crude oil approached \$80 per barrel this week, fueled in part by production cuts in Kazakhstan, an OPEC+ country grappling with social unrest.

The U.S. is the world’s leading oil-producing country, but policies aimed at curtailing production will inevitably result in “consequences,” Mr. Sommers said.

“U.S. policies that restrict domestic production force our country to seek relief from OPEC, undermining our energy independence,” he said. “America should not be in the position of asking for foreign energy supplies, especially when we have abundant resources produced to standards that are among the highest in the world right here at home.”

In August, the Biden administration asked the OPEC nations to pump more oil to bring down skyrocketing fuel prices, a request OPEC and its oil-producing allies rebuffed, prompting industry officials to counter that he should instead encourage U.S. production.

Mr. Biden, who released 50 million barrels of oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve in November, has characterized the soaring gas prices as temporary as the nation transitions away from fossil fuels.

	“It will take time, but before long, you should see the price of gas drop where you fill up your tank,” he said in Nov. 23 remarks. “And in the longer term, we will reduce our reliance on oil as we shift to clean energy.”
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Soaring tax revenue constrain govt. deficit
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/12/soaring-tax-revenue-helping-constrain-federal-defi/
GIST	<p>The first three months of fiscal 2022 are in the books, and the numbers show the federal government’s deficit has gone from the catastrophic levels of last year back to the merely grave situation pre-pandemic.</p> <p>Spending is still running high, but tax revenue has begun to catch up, according to Treasury Department data released Wednesday.</p> <p>Uncle Sam collected \$1.052 trillion in revenue from October through December. That’s about \$250 billion more than the same period last year. By contrast, spending was up only a little more than \$50 billion, at \$1.430 trillion.</p> <p>Things are still deeply in arrears, with a \$378 billion deficit for the three months. But that’s considerably better than the \$573 billion deficit at the same point last year.</p> <p>It’s also only slightly off the \$357 billion deficit the government ran from October to December 2019. That was the last full quarter before the pandemic hit, pressuring Congress to open up the federal spending spigot to stem the pain of economic calamity and pump billions into combating the coronavirus itself.</p> <p>The Congressional Budget Office says most of the revenue increase has come from higher paycheck withholding, as workers’ wages and salaries rise. That’s particularly true among higher-income workers, who pay taxes at higher rates, the CBO said.</p> <p>Corporate tax payments were also up 44%, or \$30 billion, CBO said.</p> <p>On the spending side much of the early pandemic spending has expired — particularly enhanced unemployment benefits. That program dropped from \$80 billion in the first quarter of fiscal year 2021 to just \$13 billion in 2022.</p> <p>But President Biden’s \$1.9 trillion stimulus package, which cleared Congress in March, has ensured overall spending remains high.</p> <p>Expanded eligibility for food stamps, expanded eligibility for Medicaid, emergency pandemic spending by the Education Department and a major expansion of tax credits all contributed to hefty spending totals.</p> <p>Net interest on the debt has also risen sharply, up 18% so far this year, chiefly because of soaring inflation, CBO said.</p> <p>The federal government ran a \$2.77 trillion deficit in 2021 — the second worst on record, trailing only the pandemic-plagued 2020.</p> <p>But if finances are running closer to pre-pandemic levels, that suggests this year’s deficit could run closer to the \$1 trillion level projected for 2020, before the pandemic struck.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Omicron so contagious ‘most will get it’
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/12/omicron-covid-contagious-janet-woodcock-fauci
GIST	Federal health authorities in America have said the Omicron Covid-19 variant is so contagious it is likely most people in the US will be infected, and compared the pandemic to a “natural disaster”.

Authorities said even as Omicron shatters records for new cases, they are hopeful the surge will quickly subside, and said the US needs to focus on ensuring hospital systems do not collapse amid the surge.

“I think it’s hard to process what’s actually happening right now, which is [that] most people are going to get Covid, all right?” said Janet Woodcock, the acting head of the Food and Drug Administration. “What we need to do is make sure the hospitals can still function ... [that] transportation, other essential services are not disrupted while this happens.”

Woodcock made the comments at a Senate hearing where senators, especially Republicans, harshly questioned administration officials tasked with responding to the pandemic, including Woodcock, the head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Rochelle Walensky, and the president’s chief medical adviser, Anthony Fauci.

With several major mutations, the Omicron variant has spread rapidly around the globe and shattered records for new daily cases in the US. The [CDC reports](#) that the variant is now responsible for more than 98% of Covid-19 cases in the US, replacing Delta in less than a month.

At the same time, the variant is believed to be less lethal than previous strains and there is some evidence it may quickly peak.

However, even as Omicron sends fewer patients to the hospital as a proportion of total cases, the deluge of cases has put hospitals, schools and businesses under strain – filling up beds, causing staff shortages and prompting a return to remote activities.

An average of more than 761,000 Americans a day tested positive for Covid-19 on Tuesday, the day of the hearing, according to the [New York Times](#). Even this tally is known to be a vast undercount, because few people report the positive results of at-home rapid tests to health authorities.

On the same day the previous year, also the peak of a winter surge, an average of 251,232 people tested positive for Covid-19.

Even as Omicron stresses essential systems, severe illness is not inevitable, and health authorities stressed the importance of vaccination to reduce the likelihood of severe illness. The CDC is also [considering a recommendation](#) for Americans to wear N95 and KN95 masks, rather than cloth ones, if possible.

Fauci later echoed Woodcock’s comments, that most Americans are likely to be infected with the variant, at the Centers for Strategic and International Studies, a thinktank in Washington. He added that comparatively few vaccinated and boosted Americans will face hospitalization and death.

“Omicron, with its extraordinary, unprecedented degree of efficiency of transmissibility, will ultimately find just about everybody,” Fauci told J Stephen Morrison, senior vice-president of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, [CNN reported](#).

“Those who have been vaccinated ... and boosted would get exposed. Some, maybe a lot of them, will get infected but will very likely, with some exceptions, do reasonably well in the sense of not having hospitalization and death,” he said. People who have not been vaccinated are far more likely to, “get the brunt of the severe aspect of this”.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/13 Report: regimes face significant backlash
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/13/increased-repression-and-violence-a-sign-of-weakness-says-human-rights-watch
GIST	Increasingly repressive and violent acts against civilian protests by autocratic leaders and military regimes around the world are signs of their desperation and weakening grip on power, Human Rights Watch says in its annual assessment of human rights across the globe.

In its [world report 2022](#), the human rights organisation said autocratic leaders faced a significant backlash in 2021, with millions of people risking their lives to take to the streets to challenge regimes' authority and demand democracy.

Human Rights Watch also said the emergence of opposition parties willing to put aside their political differences and form alliances to attempt to remove corrupt or repressive governments or leaders was another sign of a trend towards weakening autocratic rule.

As examples of "unlikely" opposition coalitions, HRW pointed to the Czech Republic, where the [prime minister, Andrej Babiš](#), was defeated, and Israel, where the premiership of [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) was brought to an end after 12 years in power in 2021. Broad alliances of opposition parties have also been formed to [challenge Viktor Orbán](#) in Hungary and [Recep Tayyip Erdoğan](#) in Turkey in future elections.

In an essay introducing Human Rights Watch's report, which analyses the situation in countries across the world, its director, Kenneth Roth, also argues that growing repression and "overt electoral charades" in countries such as Russia and [Nicaragua](#) should be seen as a sign of weakness, not strength.

"There is a narrative that autocrats are prevailing and democracy is on the decline, yet if you look at the trends in human rights over the last 12 months it doesn't look so rosy for the autocrats," said Roth.

"There has been an outpouring of public support for democracy with people taking to the streets in China, [Uganda](#), [Poland](#), Myanmar, often risking their lives to do so, and many other places where repressive regimes are struggling to maintain their control.

"While the increasingly violent and regressive actions of repressive regimes across the world may look like them flexing their muscles, we increasingly see these as acts of desperation," he said.

While 2021 saw the seizure of power by armed groups in [Myanmar](#) and Afghanistan, Roth said there had been a failure to normalise their rule or subdue civilian populations.

"While we see bloodshed on the streets, we also see millions refusing to accept the denial of their human rights and a failure of autocratic rulers to distract populations with policies attacking LGBTQ communities, abortion or women's rights."

However, he said that democracy would fail to thrive without stronger leadership by democratic governments, which focused on short-term political gains during 2021 and failed to address the most urgent issues of the climate emergency, inequality, racial injustice and poverty.

Human Rights Watch said that despite their alarming record on rights abuses, the US continued to provide arms to countries such as [Egypt](#), [Saudi Arabia](#) and the [United Arab Emirates](#). It also pointed to continued moves by the EU to pursue [investment deals with China](#), despite Beijing's alleged use of ethnic Uyghurs as forced labour.

"Promoting democracy means standing up for democratic institutions such as independent courts, free media, robust parliaments and vibrant civil societies even when that brings unwelcome scrutiny or challenges to executive policies," Roth said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 France faces huge education strike
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/13/half-of-french-primary-schools-expected-to-close-teachers-strike-protest-covid-education
GIST	France faces one of its biggest education strikes in decades on Thursday, when about 75% of teachers are expected to walk out, forcing the closure of half the country's primary schools in protest at the government's handling of Covid-19 measures in the education sector.

President [Emmanuel Macron](#) this week restated the government view that one of France's greatest successes during the pandemic had been to keep schools open more than any other country in the world.

"I fundamentally believe the choice that we made to keep schools open is the right choice," he said.

"France is the country that kept its schools open the most," the education minister, Jean-Michel Blanquer, has said.

But a surge in Covid infections, driven by a sharp rise in the highly contagious Omicron variant, has created major disruption in schools since they reopened at the start of January – with about 10,000 classes closed because of infections among pupils and staff.

Parents and children have faced long and often bewildering queues outside pharmacies to be tested in order to keep up with the requirements for pupils in a class where there has been a positive case. Testing rules for children have changed several times since the start of January. France's prime minister, Jean Castex, finally announced this week that a series of home tests could now be used to determine whether a student can return to school.

Children over the age of six must wear masks in French schools.

Teaching unions said the government was failing children by a disorganised approach that provided inadequate protection against infection for staff and students alike, and failed to ensure replacement cover for teachers falling ill while leaving schools acting as a form of test-and-trace managers.

"Students cannot learn properly because attendance varies wildly, and a hybrid of in-house and distance learning is impossible to put in place," the SUNipp-FSU said, adding that absent teachers were not being replaced.

Unions are also demanding the government provides the more protective FFP2 face masks for staff, and CO2 monitors to check whether classrooms are sufficiently ventilated.

"Not only does the current protocol not protect students, staff or their families, it has completely disorganised schools," the union said, claiming that classes have effectively been turned into "daycare centres".

In a rare move, France's largest parents' group, the FCPE, supported the strike, encouraging parents to keep their children home on Thursday. The group said France needed more saliva testing within schools, rather than lateral flow tests at home; a proper strategy to ensure distance learning; and to replace absent teachers. "Just keeping the school's doors open isn't enough," Rodrigo Arenas, the co-president of the FCPE, told Le Monde.

Valérie Pécresse, a key challenger to Macron in this spring's presidential election race from the rightwing Les Républicains party, accused the government of disorder and chaos, saying it would have been better to defer the start of the January term to allow schools to prepare and to slow transmission rates.

Blanquer argued this week that the government was doing everything possible to avoid outright school closures that could cause havoc for parents and jeopardise learning for thousands of children, especially those from low-income families. "I know there is a lot of fatigue, of anxiety ... but you don't go on strike against a virus," he said in a TV interview.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 Omicron dims South America optimism
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/12/south-america-covid-omicron-brazil-argentina

As the pandemic's second, gruelling year drew to a close and Covid rates in Rio de Janeiro plunged to levels unseen since it began, the Brazilian city's health secretary, Daniel Soranz, celebrated a desperately needed respite.

"We've been through such painful, difficult months ... this is now a moment of hope," the 42-year-old doctor said last November as *carioca* life regained some semblance of normality, hospitals emptied and [the city's effervescent cultural scene was reborn](#).

But the new year, and the arrival of the highly contagious [Omicron variant](#), has brought Soranz and many others crashing back down to Earth as coronavirus cases surge across Latin America with consequences that remain unclear.

"It's really tiring," Soranz admitted this week as infections in his beachside city [soared to their highest ever levels](#) and plans for Rio's rumbustious annual carnival were cast into doubt.

"This pandemic has been going on for almost two years. It's exhausting. But there's nothing to be done," Soranz said, noting how 20% of Rio's health workers – about 5,000 people – had been infected since December.

Similar angst is being voiced around South America, which, having witnessed [some of the pandemic's bleakest moments](#) – with [bodies dumped in mass graves](#) and patients starved of oxygen in [overwhelmed hospitals](#) – had been enjoying a long-awaited moment of optimism after becoming one of the world vaccination champions. Nearly 65% of South Americans have been fully vaccinated, according to the University of Oxford's Our World in Data project, compared with about 62% in Europe and the US, and less than 10% in Africa.

So far [Argentina](#) seems to be the South American country worst hit by Omicron. Over the last week it registered over 50% of South America's daily cases, with just 11% of its population, and had the world's seventh-highest number of daily cases.

Although cases are rising in a straight line from a daily average of about 2,400 a month ago to more than 130,000 now, authorities say they are not unduly worried. Their assumption is that Covid has become an endemic disease and vaccination is the only necessary safeguard. The government is relaxing restrictions even more than last September when restaurants, football matches and entertainment venues reopened after a sharp dip in cases, and the outdoor mask mandate was lifted.

"In the evolution of the disease you can see that it is really like chickenpox, the flu or that type of disease. The transition to the endemic will no longer require testing all cases and the role of isolation will change," the health minister, Carla Vizzotti, told journalists on Tuesday.

Health official Sandra Tirado [predicted](#) cases could begin to fall in the next two weeks and pointed to Córdoba province where Omicron infections were already coming down.

Arnaldo Dubin, an ICU doctor at a private Buenos Aires hospital, said he had deep misgivings about Argentina's Covid policy and believed mask mandates had to return. "It's horrifying. You have a very serious Covid situation that is paradoxically simultaneous with a total relaxation of safeguards."

Peru, which has [one of the world's worst per-capita death tolls](#), is also suffering, with more confirmed infections in the first week of January than during its ferocious second wave in early 2021. Other South American countries including Bolivia, Guyana and Uruguay have also seen infections jump while further north, Omicron appears to be rattling Mexico.

On Saturday, a record 30,671 coronavirus cases were registered. On Monday, Mexico's president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, announced he had tested positive for the second time in a year and was isolating.

“I think it’s the flu,” López Obrador, whose dismissive handling of the pandemic has been criticised, had [told a press conference](#) earlier in the day. He appeared without a mask despite admitting feeling hoarse.

Brazil, which was already facing a major influenza outbreak, is also under pressure although [a statistics blackout](#) apparently caused by a hacking attack on the health ministry is hampering efforts to track the surge.

Isaac Schrarstzhaupt, a data scientist who monitors Covid statistics, said Brazil was clearly careening into a new wave, with states such as Rio Grande do Sul and São Paulo seeing a “vertiginous increase” in infections similar to that in Europe. “But [because of the blackout] we don’t know the scale of it and I fear we’ll only understand when hospitals start raising their hands to say: ‘Hey, we’re in trouble over here.’”

Schrarstzhaupt warned: “Even if there’s a 95% reduction in severe cases, if we hit one million cases a day like the US, the remaining 5% will still be a very big number.”

Rio’s health secretary said there was no doubt Omicron was driving a major Covid outbreak there. It had taken Omicron just 17 days to become Rio’s dominant variant, responsible for more than 98% of cases. Previous variants took more than 45 days to do the same.

Soranz voiced apprehension about the coming days and could not confirm February’s carnival would go ahead. However, high vaccination levels seemed to be helping prevent a more dramatic crisis – as appears also to be the case in neighbours such as Peru and Argentina, and European countries such as Portugal.

Ninety-six per cent of Rio’s adults have been double jabbed and 32% boosted. Soranz said 13 Covid patients were admitted on Sunday: 11 unvaccinated and two with only one shot.

“There’s no way to predict what’s going to happen – but we can see it’s spreading much faster and that this is not being accompanied by severe cases or fatalities,” Soranz said, before adding a word of caution: “This could change.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 Germany: record number Covid cases
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/12/germany-reports-record-number-of-daily-covid-cases
GIST	<p>Germany has reported a record number of daily coronavirus cases as the Omicron variant increases its spread.</p> <p>The Robert Koch Institute, the country’s national disease control agency, said on Wednesday it had registered 80,430 new cases, where the previous record had been just over 65,000 in mid-November. It said 384 people had died in the previous 24 hours, bringing the death toll from coronavirus in Europe’s most populous country to about 115,000.</p> <p>As health officials and policy makers seek ways to keep this latest wave under control, given the infectiousness of the Omicron variant which is dominating in parts of the country, they remain cautiously optimistic that the relatively low hospitalisation rate and tightening of protection measures will contribute to managing the virus over the coming weeks.</p> <p>Concern is focused on ensuring the most vulnerable are vaccinated, and that all adults have access to a third booster shot, as well as on keeping up vital facilities such as hospitals and rubbish collection amid a rise in sickness levels across the workforce.</p> <p>A vaccine mandate – so-called <i>Impfpflicht</i> – is being hotly discussed across the political parties. A Bundestag debate on the subject is scheduled for two weeks’ time, and a law could be in place by March, leading MPs have said. Among suggested variations are a regulation that would be limited to a year, or one that would target only those over the age of 50.</p>

The country's president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, said due to differing opinions on the issue, and the fact that many who had previously rejected the idea of an obligatory vaccine were now in favour of it, a "thorough debate" was necessary. He told a group of citizens at a discussion event that people who claimed Germany was controlled by a "coronavirus dictatorship" were "showing contempt for democracy and its constitutional institutions". He added: "This is simply vicious nonsense."

While leading government figures such as the chancellor, Olaf Scholz, and the health minister, Karl Lauterbach, have made public their support for a mandate, the government has said a vote on the issue would not be government-led, in order to ensure as wide a consensus as possible.

With a growth in the number and regularity of protests across the country against coronavirus protection measures in recent weeks, as well as death threats faced by politicians, there is an acute awareness of the need to keep the majority of the public onboard. Most Germans have said in polls that they are in favour of a vaccine mandate.

As of Tuesday, 72.2% of all Germans had been double-jabbed, and 51.4% of adults had received the recommended booster jab. The government's goal is for 80% of the population to have been vaccinated by the end of this month. Scholz has said he would later aim for 90%.

Lauterbach announced on Wednesday that the country had enough stocks to give every German three more jabs, having procured an extra 5m doses from fellow EU partner Romania, which has been unable to administer them.

Some vaccine sceptics have said they might be persuaded to be vaccinated once Novavax, a vaccine referred to as a "dead" vaccine because it contains the spike proteins that cover the virus's surface, becomes available, possibly later this month. The hope is that this will help to boost vaccine take-up.

Stricter measures were introduced on Tuesday across Germany, particularly in restaurants and hotels. Referred to as 2G+, they require people to show proof they have been double-vaccinated, or have recovered within the last six months, and have either received a booster shot or have an official negative test result.

These rules have been extended to the Bundestag, requiring MPs who are not vaccinated and have no medical exemption, to sit in the public gallery above the plenary hall, as long as they have an official negative test result. In addition they must now wear medical FFP2 masks. Thinner, typically blue medical masks widely used until now are no longer allowed. The rules will be in place until 28 February.

Both the far-right populist AfD and members of the far-left Die Linke have threatened to take legal steps against the move. Alice Weidel, the leader of the AfD parliamentary group, who was unvaccinated but has recovered from coronavirus, accused the government of "shrinking MPs' mandates".

She received unlikely support from Sahra Wagenknecht of Die Linke, who told Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland in an interview: "To lock unvaccinated MPs out of the plenary hall rather than requiring everyone to take a tests, is epidemiologically nonsensical and quite clearly unconstitutional, owing to the lack of protection vaccines give against infection and transmission."

The video platform YouTube has meanwhile confirmed reports that it had blocked the anti-coronavirus measures lobby group #allesaufdentisch (lay it on the table), key supporters of which include leading figures from the German cultural world, from uploading videos for several days after it was accused of spreading falsehoods about the virus.

One of the videos posted by the group falsely claimed that the coronavirus vaccine had led to 13,000 deaths, and compared the virus to a light cold. A YouTube spokesman confirmed to Spiegel that the video had "contravened our medical misinformation policy".

	With increasing numbers of Germans working from home once again, the labour minister, Hubertus Heil, announced on Wednesday that in future employers would be obliged by law to allow employees to work from home as long as this was compatible with their jobs.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Pierce Co. shortage of 911 dispatchers
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/article257085702.html
GIST	<p>Pierce County's emergency communications agency has more than 20 budgeted positions unfilled, causing its timeliness in responding to calls to dip below the national standard.</p> <p>A shortage of dispatchers also is leading to burnout, has hurt retention and left employees with mandated overtime, which in 2021 cost the public at least \$1 million more than it did in 2020.</p> <p>South Sound 911 executive director Deborah Grady said the agency is working to hire as many qualified candidates as possible.</p> <p>"Staffing has been a chronic plague for the agency," Grady said.</p> <p>South Sound 911 is an independent, intergovernmental agency overseen by a board of directors made up of elected officials and public safety officials across Pierce County. The agency was created in 2012 as a way to streamline radio communications for first responders. The center is responsible for relaying emergencies from the public to fire departments and police, including Tacoma's police and fire departments and the Pierce County Sheriff's Department. South Sound 911 responded to almost 742,000 calls between January and September 2021, 60 percent of which were deemed emergencies.</p> <p>Last year, the emergency communications agency moved into a long-awaited new building at 3580 Pacific Ave. In 2011, voters approved a tax of a penny on every \$10 purchase to build the \$59 million communications building.</p> <p>Including management, the call center has 118 call-ready dispatchers with nine part-time employees on the job today. The agency is budgeted to have 142 call-ready dispatchers, spokesperson Kris McNamara said.</p> <p>Insufficient staffing levels have impacted call response.</p> <p>Overall call performance dropped in 2021 compared to previous years, to a level below the national standard. The country's leading organization on 911 dispatch centers, the National Emergency Number Association, has set a target for centers to answer 95 percent of 911 calls within 20 seconds. South Sound 911 has reported a 2021 rate of 93.6 percent.</p> <p>Pierce County Council member Amy Cruver (R-Eatonville) said public safety is the first responsibility of government. She has asked for the county's Public Safety Committee to discuss steps to alleviate the staffing needs.</p> <p>"To learn that the agency responsible for dispatching emergency assistance is struggling to provide the services it was directed to provide, despite having lucrative funding sources and a state of the art building, is cause for concern," she said in a statement to The News Tribune.</p> <p>OVERTIME</p> <p>Overtime expenses have risen steeply in the last year.</p> <p>According to the most recent figures available, the agency spent \$4.89 million dollars on overtime from January to September 2021. It had budgeted \$2.6 million for the entire year. Money saved from unfilled positions helped to cover those costs, McNamar said.</p>

From January to September of 2021, overtime costs for fire communications doubled that of 2020's tally with \$698,870 spent.

In both 2019 and 2020, the agency spent about \$2.8 million on overtime for law enforcement dispatchers, but by September 2021, more than \$3.1 million had been spent.

The emergency dispatchers union, Teamsters Local Union No. 117, said its members have raised concerns over staffing numerous times.

"Many of our members have been working an inordinate amount of overtime — hundreds of hours a year in some cases," union secretary-treasurer John Searcy said.

"Many employees have had an insufficient number of days off to rest and are suffering from exhaustion and burnout."

If not enough workers volunteer for overtime or someone falls sick, staff can be mandated to work overtime, Grady said. "We want our employees to have work-life balance and to be able to make sure the employees have the time off, so that we reduce mandatory overtime needed to be correctly staffed," she said.

Overtime was acute during a COVID-19 outbreak at the center last summer.

An outbreak surged through the dispatch center from late July into August, causing "critical staffing levels," according to emails obtained by The News Tribune. An employee reported to the Washington State Department of Labor on July 29 that COVID-19 protocol was not being followed. The complaint said South Sound 911 was not following masking protocols and employees were showing up to work sick.

The agency responded to L&I that it has several mitigation measures in place, including mask mandates and supervisory screening of employees with COVID-19 symptoms. Staff were asked to present a vaccination card or wear masks unless they were eating or drinking.

The Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department reported on Aug. 6 that South Sound 911 had 17 COVID-19 cases. In at least one instance during the outbreak, management directed staff to use the radio for "priority traffic," emails show.

"Basically, when we are down to 3 (or even 2 the other day for a couple of hours), we will not be able to respond on the radio or phone as quickly as we normally would. If officers can reserve calls for priority (confirmations, clears, emergency entries) that would be appreciated. We obviously won't turn anyone away, but there could be significant delays," assistant director of Information Services Rebecca Hendricks said in an email to staff on Aug. 4.

Before the outbreak, the communications department's vaccination rate was 39 percent. As of Jan. 3, the rate was 73 percent, according to McNamara. Emails during the outbreak show a change in regulation from allowing self-attestation on vaccination status to requiring proof of vaccination. Those unvaccinated were directed to wear masks during their shifts.

As during the summer outbreak, Grady expects trained managers and leadership to step in to help during any future COVID-19 outbreaks.

"COVID has been a concern for the last two years as we have continually adapted to new/changing information, requirements or mandates. With the current surge, we have continued mitigation measures to help us get through this new event and through the peak," she said.

DIFFICULTY HIRING, RETAINING

Former South Sound 911 board director Lillian Hunter said the agency has faced staffing shortages for years. The emergency call center has worked hard to recruit and retain staff, but the job is demanding and exhausting.

“They are the real first responders because they take the call before the police and fire get there. That work takes a toll,” Hunter said.

Dispatchers responding to emergency calls all day is inherently stressful, according to National Emergency Number Association’s executive director April Heinze.

“You go from things like a mother calling because she accidentally locked her child in a car to somebody who’s now having a full cardiac arrest, and you’re talking somebody through CPR, to barking dog complaint, to a critical accident on a major highway that you’re sending multiple types of responses and so on,” she said.

“You’re in a constant state of hyper vigilance, because you never know what you’re going to deal with. So your body’s always feeling it.”

If police response is delayed or denied, Hunter said the dispatcher can bear the brunt of push back.

“People are calling, screaming for help, and there is no help available or they aren’t coming,” Hunter said. “That adds to the stress of what a call-taker has to put up with.”

The lack of interest in jobs at dispatch centers is not unique to Pierce County. Emergency dispatch centers across the country are reporting the same staffing shortages, causing a delay in response and added stress on dispatchers, Heinze said.

She listed a few reasons for the lack of interest in dispatching. The hiring process for dispatch centers is more rigorous than many other jobs, including extensive background checks, screening and tests. The job requires longer hours — 10 and 12 hour shifts — as compared to many eight-hour desk jobs. Heinze said she has seen a significant decrease in interest after companies allowed work from home during the coronavirus pandemic.

“Unfortunately, these are definitely jobs that can’t be done from home. A lot of the workforce today really want to be able to work from home,” Heinze said.

“They have access to extremely sensitive information. You don’t want people to be able to just access that sensitive information from anywhere. They need to be able to do so in a confined, controlled environment.”

Some centers have low pay and below-average benefits, Heinze said, but South Sound 911 was ranked as a top employer by the Economic Development Board, offering some of the highest pay for dispatchers in Washington, that starts at \$30.28 per hour.

The pandemic has sparked early retirements or retirements from those eligible but hadn’t planned on leaving, Heinze said. The dearth of employees only makes the job more difficult, increasing the burnout rate.

“Once you get behind the eight ball, as far as hiring is concerned, you’re ending up putting more pressure on the current staff to help fill those voids,” she said.

Grady has started bringing back former employees as part-time workers to offset some of the shortage. Eight of the nine part-time employees are former staff members.

“How great is that? They were already trained and don’t need to go through our new hire academy,” she said.

Retention at South Sound 911 has been a worry.

According to internal records, 46 percent of staff have worked less than five years at the agency. The agency saw a 17 percent turnover rate last year, which Grady feels is too high, but remains within the national average of 15 to 20 percent of annual turnover.

With mandated overtime, Grady said work-life balance has been a key issue for staff.

“People want predictability in their life and in their work schedule,” she said.

Hiring has become a top priority for the agency. The dispatch center management has told staff “no recruiting or staffing idea is off the table at this point.”

Last year, South Sound 911 started using some innovative ways to recruit, including a farmers’ market booth, bus advertisements and virtual job fairs. Their efforts have alleviated some of the stress, with eight hires starting this month, Grady said.

The executive director wants to bolster the ranks with a handful of more positions this year to further reduce stress on dispatchers.

“It’s hugely beneficial to the employee if you have the right number of people to carry the workload so you don’t feel like they’re being slammed and just going from call to call,” Grady said.

The job can be rewarding, Heinze said. “The amount of people that you get to help in a day, there’s just no other job that you’re going to really be able to help that number of individuals,” she told The News Tribune.

If short-staffing levels continue, Heinze worries that centers face delayed emergency call times, offloaded nonemergency calls to a website and fewer services.

“A lot of 911 centers provide what we call give pre-arrival instructions, where we can provide CPR instructions or first aid or other types of instructions, like delivering a baby, In the event that there is just not enough staff to be able to do that,” she said.

In addition to recruiting for the existing vacancies, Grady hopes the board will approve more positions and their recruiting efforts will bring forward more applicants year before the board’s approval in late summer.

“We are addressing it, and we’re doing everything we can to address it,” Grady said. “Having the right number of people to answer 911 calls is something that is critical to public safety everywhere. So not being able to manage the call volume is the concern.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 Free virus tests to schools to stay open
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/12/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines?type=stylIn-live-updates&label=coronavirus%20updates&index=0#biden-administration-promises-millions-of-free-covid-tests-to-help-schools-stay-open
GIST	<p>The White House said Wednesday that it would distribute millions of free coronavirus tests to schools across the United States to try to keep classrooms open — a top goal of President Biden and Democrats who worry that tensions over pandemic-related school closures will hurt them at the polls.</p> <p>Five million rapid antigen tests will be made available to K-12 schools across the country each month, the administration said, but states will have to apply for them. Once such requests are made, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will work to deliver the first shipments as early as this month.</p>

The White House also promised to make lab capacity available for five million free polymerase chain reaction, or P.C.R., tests, facilitated through three federally-funded regional providers each month. The providers will offer testing materials, supplies, lab results and reporting at no direct cost to schools, which will have access to the services immediately.

“Today the Biden-Harris Administration is doubling down on our commitment to keeping all schools safely open for full-time in-person learning,” the White House said in a fact sheet distributed to reporters.

The expanded testing initiative comes as debates have raged over [whether schools should continue in-person instruction](#) amid an Omicron-driven surge of cases and as many Americans struggle to get tested. Those debates have put Democrats in a bind; the party has traditionally been close to teachers’ unions, which were pushing for remote learning. But Democrats are also mindful that they lost the governor’s race in Virginia, amid a backlash over school closures.

In Chicago, the nation’s third largest school district, the mayor and the teachers union [reached a deal on Monday](#) to return students to classrooms Wednesday after a dispute over virus safeguards canceled a week of classes. Los Angeles, the second-largest school district in the United States, [also moved to reopen](#) its classrooms for in-person learning this week.

The administration’s strategy to keep schools open leans heavily on testing; the C.D.C. recently announced a new “test to stay” strategy in which students exposed to the coronavirus will be able to stay in school if they test negative, as opposed to having to quarantine at home. Many schools are using rapid antigen tests to screen students on a regular basis.

“These additional tests will help schools safely remain open and implement screening testing and test-to-stay programs,” the White House said.

The American Rescue Plan, the coronavirus relief package passed by Congress last year, allocated [\\$10 billion for states](#) to set up school-based testing programs, and an additional \$130 billion to safely reopen schools. The White House said it intends to use some of the \$130 billion to advance the programs it announced on Wednesday, including helping schools set up their own testing programs.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 France: despite surge ‘not changing course’
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/12/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines?type=stylIn-live-updates&label=coronavirus%20updates&index=0#french-officials-say-they-will-not-change-course-even-as-cases-soar-and-strikes-loom
GIST	<p>The French government said on Wednesday that it would stick with its strategy of keeping the country open, despite record-shattering coronavirus case reports, growing public frustration over testing protocols in schools and the threat of strikes by teachers over Covid safety.</p> <p>France is now averaging nearly 300,000 newly reported coronavirus cases a day, almost six times as many as a month ago and far more than at any earlier point in the pandemic. Some 23,000 Covid-19 patients are in French hospitals, nearly 4,000 of them in intensive care. Nearly 2 percent of the country’s entire population tested positive in a single week, from Dec. 27 to Jan. 2, according to French health authorities.</p> <p>“The pandemic is stronger than ever in our country,” Gabriel Attal, a government spokesman, acknowledged to reporters on Wednesday after a cabinet meeting. But despite those “dizzying” figures, he said, “we are not changing course.”</p> <p>“We want to live as normally as possible despite the virus,” Mr. Attal added.</p> <p>The surge in cases has been driven by the rapid spread of the highly transmissible Omicron variant, which now accounts for 90 percent of new infections, Mr. Attal said.</p>

While there is [evidence that Omicron tends to cause less severe illness](#) than previous coronavirus variants did, France was already being battered by a wave of Covid-19 cases attributable to the Delta variant when Omicron started to surge, compounding the pressure on French hospitals.

Unlike some European leaders, President Emmanuel Macron, who faces a presidential election in April, has chosen not to impose lockdowns or curfews to contain the surge and has [focused instead on pressing the unvaccinated to get shots](#). A few rules on mask-wearing and indoor gatherings have been tightened, but cafes, restaurants, cinemas, museums and most other public establishments remain fully open for business.

The French government has taken special pride in keeping its schools open during the pandemic longer than many other European countries or the United States have done.

But the policy has come at a cost. The government set up complex testing rules meant to spare whole classes or entire schools from having to shut down over a positive case or two, and then changed the rules twice within a week, discombobulating millions of parents and teachers. The testing protocols have led to snaking lines of exasperated parents standing in the cold outside pharmacies and medical laboratories.

Teachers across the country are expected to strike on Thursday over coronavirus safety. Already struggling with staffing shortages and confusion over the testing protocols, the teachers are angry over a lack of equipment like [air quality monitors](#) and shortages of highly protective masks.

“Enough is enough!” the SNES-FSU, one of France’s leading teacher unions, said in [statement](#) announcing the strike.

France’s health minister, Olivier Véran, defended the government’s strategy on Wednesday.

[Speaking to Franceinfo radio](#), Mr. Véran denied accusations that France had given up on containing the epidemic, noting new limits on public gatherings and enforcement of work-from-home mandates for some private-sector workers.

He argued that stricter measures like lockdowns and curfews would only delay a wave of Omicron cases, not prevent one. “Traditional measures don’t have a real impact on a variant as contagious as this one,” he said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 Housing costs jump; prices, rents push up
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/12/business/housing-rent-inflation.html
GIST	<p>Housing costs jumped last month, as higher prices continued to constrain aspiring home buyers and push up the demand for apartment and home leases.</p> <p>Rent costs rose 0.4 percent in December, according to government data released on Wednesday, helping to drive the Consumer Price Index up 7 percent in the year through December.</p> <p>Rent, along with “owners’ equivalent rent” — a measure that tries to put a price on how much homeowners would pay for housing if they hadn’t purchased their home — make up about a third of the index, so they are a key component of inflation.</p> <p>The relentless increase in housing costs, which typically move slowly and remain high once they rise, could continue to put pressure on the Federal Reserve because it could prolong price gains. Rising rents also affect household budgets acutely and persistently, which contribute to feelings of economic unease that could spell trouble for Democrats heading into a midterm election year that will be pivotal for the fate of President Biden’s agenda.</p> <p>The December data was a capstone to a buoyant year for the housing market after a weak 2020. Several factors have contributed to the surge, including that many would-be home buyers — often young adults</p>

eager for more space during the pandemic — found themselves on the sidelines as housing prices rose steeply during the pandemic. This kept more people in the rental market, leading to increased desire for rental apartments, homes and condominiums.

At the same time, supply chain issues and labor shortages continued to curtail the number of new houses and apartment buildings available, exacerbating the mismatch between housing supply and demand.

“Americans were playing musical chairs with their housing but more and more people kept joining into the game, and we had trouble building chairs because of lumber shortages,” said Igor Popov, the chief economist at Apartment List.

Unlike in 2020, when rental costs rose in more affordable markets and midsize suburbs but fell in big cities such as New York, rents in 2021 “went up dramatically basically everywhere,” Mr. Popov said.

There may not be much relief for renters this year, either. [Apartment List’s real-time rent tracker](#) showed that the market began to cool down at the end of the year. Many economists anticipate that the rate of growth may slow, but they expect rental costs overall to continue to rise.

“My gut feeling is that the pace of appreciation is going to be slower in 2022 than it was in 2021,” said Jeff Tucker, a senior economist at Zillow. “But I don’t see rents actually dropping or getting more affordable.”

That could be particularly frustrating for people who would have become homeowners if they could have afforded it. Unable to buy a home, they may now be equally unlucky with rent, as landlords continue to do away with pandemic-era rent concessions and raise rents because of increased demand.

For those people, navigating the housing market this year “is going to really sting a lot more,” Mr. Tucker said.

“The cost of rent is rising so a lot of people will feel caught between a rock and a hard place or between a frying pan and a fire,” he added.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 Inflation: consumer prices jump 7%
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/12/business/economy/cpi-inflation-december-2021.html
GIST	<p>Inflation climbed to its highest level in 40 years at the end of 2021, a troubling development for President Biden and economic policymakers as rapid price gains erode consumer confidence and cast a shadow of uncertainty over the economy’s future.</p> <p>The Consumer Price Index rose 7 percent in the year through December, and 5.5 percent after stripping out volatile prices such as food and fuel. The last time the main inflation index eclipsed 7 percent was 1982.</p> <p>Policymakers have spent months waiting for inflation to fade, hoping supply chain problems might ease and allow companies to catch up with booming consumer demand. Instead, continued waves of the coronavirus have locked down factories, and shipping companies have struggled to work through extended backlogs as consumers continue to buy foreign goods at a rapid clip. Forecasters expect price gains to weaken this year, but how quickly that will happen is unclear, posing a big economic policy question for Mr. Biden and the Federal Reserve.</p> <p>“Obviously 7 percent is a pretty big sticker shock,” said Omair Sharif, founder of the research firm Inflation Insights. He added that inflation could plateau around 7 percent, but would take time to ease back from that peak. It is likely to end 2022 lower, but still above the near-2 percent level that policymakers prefer.</p> <p>“It’s just a lot of wood to chop to get down to anything approaching the good old days,” Mr. Sharif said.</p>

The fresh data released on Wednesday showed the costs of used cars and food both increasing quickly, and provided further evidence that price gains are broadening beyond just a few pandemic-disrupted categories. Rents continue to pick up at a solid pace, and restaurant meals are more expensive, possibly a sign that recent wage increases are beginning to contribute to higher prices as employers look to cover higher labor costs.

That price increases are becoming more widespread — and creeping into areas that are not so directly affected by the pandemic — is a worrisome development for economic policymakers, who are now poised to respond. Federal Reserve officials have indicated that they expect to raise interest rates several times this year as they try to cool demand and the economy in an attempt to prevent the pandemic-era burst in prices from becoming a permanent feature of the economic landscape.

Jerome H. Powell, the Fed chair, [emphasized on Tuesday](#) that the central bank was shifting into inflation-fighting mode after nearly two years of trying to prop up the pandemic-stricken economy by keeping interest rates near zero. Officials expect price gains to [slow considerably](#), but are closely watching how quickly that happens as they consider the pace of rate increases. Investors expect four rate moves this year, and policymakers penciled in three as of their December meeting.

“If we see inflation persisting at high levels longer than expected, if we have to raise interest rates more over time, we will,” Mr. Powell told lawmakers during a Senate Banking Committee hearing on Tuesday.

Fed officials target a separate inflation index, the personal consumption expenditures measure. The C.P.I. data released Wednesday feeds into those figures and are released earlier, which is why they draw investor and policymaker attention.

Controlling inflation is primarily the Fed’s job, but rising prices are a political liability for Mr. Biden.

Democrats are heading into a challenging midterm election year, when they will battle to retain control of Congress. Republicans have increasingly accused Mr. Biden and his party of driving prices higher by flooding the economy with too much money in 2021, including a third round of stimulus checks, and the president’s poll numbers are [showing dissatisfaction](#) among voters.

Inflation concerns are also complicating Mr. Biden’s ability to pass his sprawling climate and social policy bill. Senator Joe Manchin III, the West Virginia Democrat who holds a key vote given his party’s razor-thin control of the Senate, has cited high prices as one of the reasons he won’t back the legislation.

Mr. Biden and his advisers have tried to put a positive spin on the numbers, while acknowledging the pain that price increases are causing consumers. They point to the economy’s quick rebound from the pandemic-induced 2020 recession, including falling levels of [unemployment](#). The administration is also trying to use its executive powers to alleviate supply chain problems and cool off costs — pushing [ports to extend their opening hours](#) and releasing [strategic petroleum reserves](#) to help bring fuel prices down — though most economists say those moves help only around the edges.

On Wednesday, the administration highlighted [that the monthly gain](#) in headline inflation had ticked down slightly — to 0.5 percent from 0.8 percent in November — though that rise is still unusually rapid.

“This report underscores that we still have more work to do, with price increases still too high and squeezing family budgets,” Mr. Biden said in a statement after the release.

Policymakers and economists had initially hoped that rapid price gains would fade quickly in 2021, and many still expect them to moderate throughout 2022. But economists are paying attention to a few factors that could keep prices rising too quickly for comfort.

Housing costs, based on what it costs to rent a place to live, make up about a third of the Consumer Price Index, so the fact that landlords are charging more will matter to overall inflation.

“My gut feeling is that the pace of appreciation is going to be slower in 2022 than it was in 2021,” said Jeff Tucker, a senior economist at Zillow. “But I don’t see rents actually dropping or getting more affordable.”

Global supply chains also continue to experience disruptions that are leading to shortages of parts and products and pushing costs higher across broad array of consumer goods.

The price of food grew 6.3 percent and apparel rose 5.8 percent in the year to December. Used cars and trucks — a big factor in price gains since last spring, along with new vehicles — surged 37.3 percent. Auto manufacturers have been struggling to obtain parts — particularly computer chips imported from Asia — delaying production of new vehicles and pushing up demand for a finite supply of used ones.

More disruptions could be in store. The Omicron variant of the coronavirus is leading to worker shortages for factories, ports, [trucking companies](#) and warehouses in the United States and overseas. And recent [lockdowns in China](#) meant to contain the coronavirus, inspired by the country’s continued embrace of a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to the pandemic, could exacerbate the chip shortage, among other supply chain issues.

“If they stick to their zero-case doctrine, a global supply chain disaster is on the horizon,” Tinglong Dai, a professor of operations management at Johns Hopkins University Carey Business School, said about China.

There have been early signs that shipping route snarls and [depleted inventories](#) may be moderating, but many businesses say they have seen little improvement.

The price to ship a 40-foot container from Asia to the U.S. West coast hit \$14,572 this week, down slightly from a peak of more than \$20,000 in September, but still nearly a tenfold increase from two years ago, according to data from Freightos Group.

The group’s data also showed that delivery times for ocean shipments from China to the United States stretched to a record 80 days in December, up 85 percent from 2019.

“Much of the tumultuous nature of the supply chain that occurred over the entire last year continues, and unfortunately there is not a lot of relief in sight,” said Douglas Kent, the executive vice president of strategy and alliances at the Association for Supply Chain Management.

That has become clear to Caroline McCroskey, 27 and from Tulsa, Okla., who manages marketing for a furniture manufacturer that imports pieces from China and Cambodia and sells them to major retailers. The company has seen sharp cost increases as shipping container prices have rocketed higher.

“The freight is bad enough, but we’ve seen a dramatic increase in leather hides and fabrics” along with other raw materials, including steel and foam, she said. “Nobody is feeling super optimistic about shipping rates returning to normal anytime soon.”

As it lingers, high inflation has been denting many Americans’ confidence in the economy, based on consumer surveys.

Economists and Wall Street analysts tend to focus on a measure of prices that strips out food and fuel costs, because they jump around from month to month, but those expenses matter to household pocketbooks.

Gas prices moderated somewhat in December, providing some relief for consumers, but “food at home” costs have been growing steadily more expensive and prices for meals at limited-service restaurants surged by 8 percent in 2021.

	<p>Jon Willow, 55, of Interlochen, Mich., has seen grocery costs climb steeply since the pandemic started — so much that she and her partner have tried to move away from purchased produce by canning vegetables from their garden and heating their henhouse through the winter so that their chickens keep producing eggs.</p> <p>“We have a no-food-left-behind policy at the house now — we use everything,” she said, noting that they had preserved tomatoes, squash and asparagus.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 IRS tax season start: 10M returns in backlog
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/12/business/irs-backlog-tax-returns-2021.html
GIST	<p>The Internal Revenue Service will kick off the approaching tax season with a backlog of at least 10 million unprocessed returns from last year, according to a new report by the national taxpayer advocate.</p> <p>The pile of returns remaining are from the “most challenging year taxpayers and tax professionals have ever experienced,” the advocate, Erin M. Collins, wrote in her annual report.</p> <p>Although the backlog is not too different from last season’s, it is a far higher number than the unprocessed returns the I.R.S. typically faced before the pandemic.</p> <p>One big reason for the pileup, according to the report, is that the federal government charged the I.R.S. with administering various stimulus payments and other programs during the pandemic. That meant the agency, which has had its budget and work force shrink in recent years, had to reallocate a lot of resources to carry out those financial relief programs.</p> <p>Those factors led to a “horrendous” filing season in 2021 from the standpoint of taxpayers, Ms. Collins wrote in her report, which was sent to Congress on Wednesday. Last year, the vast majority of taxpayers — 77 percent — received refunds on their 2020 tax returns, but tens of millions of them experienced delays.</p> <p>“Paper is the I.R.S.’s kryptonite, and the agency is still buried in it,” Ms. Collins said in a statement, referring to the millions of paper returns that account for most of the backlog. The Office of the Taxpayer Advocate, which Ms. Collins leads, is an independent entity within the I.R.S. that focuses on issues of taxpayer rights and services.</p> <p>The I.R.S. itself warned taxpayers this week that staffing shortages and backlogs would translate into another frustrating filing season, which begins on Jan. 24 and runs through April 18 (in most states).</p> <p>In a briefing on Monday, Treasury Department officials highlighted the lack of resources at the I.R.S. and said a lower level of service should be expected — including the time it will take staff to answer phone calls from taxpayers with questions. Treasury officials noted that in the first half of 2021, fewer than 15,000 employees were available to handle more than 240 million calls — one person for every 16,000 calls.</p> <p>Officials blamed Republican legislators, who have blocked efforts to increase funding at the agency, for the budgetary constraints.</p> <p>The Biden administration is seeking an additional \$80 billion over a decade for the I.R.S. to increase its staff, upgrade its technology and improve its enforcement and customer service capacity. That request is part of the administration’s Build Back Better Act, which is stalled in Congress.</p> <p>“Additional resources are essential to helping our employees do more in 2022 — and beyond,” Charles P. Rettig, the I.R.S. commissioner, said in a statement on Monday.</p>

Ms. Collins reiterated the agency's recommendation that Congress provide it with enough money to do its job. Since 2010, the I.R.S.'s staffing is down 17 percent, according to the report. Its workload, measured by the number of individual returns, is up from 142 million in 2010 to 169 million last year — an increase of 19 percent.

Over the past two years, the agency has been charged with administering several pandemic-related programs, including three rounds of stimulus (totaling 478 million payments worth \$812 billion) and \$93 billion in advance payments for the [expanded child tax credit](#) to more than 36 million families.

“One irony of the past year is that, despite its challenges, the I.R.S. performed well under the circumstances,” Ms. Collins wrote.

As of late December, the I.R.S. had yet to finish processing six million original tax returns, 2.3 million amended returns, more than two million employer quarterly returns and five million pieces of taxpayer correspondence — with some submissions dating to April and with many taxpayers still waiting for refunds, according to the advocate's report. In contrast, there are fewer than a million unaddressed returns in a more typical year, according to Treasury officials.

Even millions of returns filed electronically — which usually flow through the system more quickly — were suspended during processing because of discrepancies between the amounts claimed on returns and what the I.R.S. had on record.

The issue arose most frequently with the recovery rebate credit, which taxpayers claimed [when they did not receive part or all](#) of their economic incentive payments from the prior year. Those returns had to be manually reviewed by the agency, which resulted in more than 11 million math error notices. When the taxpayer disagreed with the error and submitted a response, the report said, it went into the I.R.S.'s paper processing backlog, further delaying the refund.

Ms. Collins wrote that these discrepancies were likely to crop up again this tax season — this time for the third round of stimulus payments, issued in March, and the new advanced child tax credits — resulting in more delayed returns. The I.R.S. is trying to head those problems off by sending notices to taxpayers who received the stimulus and credit payments, showing how much they received.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 US, Iran inch closer to nuclear pact?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/12/world/middleeast/us-iran-nuclear-deal.html
GIST	<p>Iran and the United States have recently engaged in a spiraling escalation of threats and warnings, even as they are progressing in diplomatic talks about reviving the 2015 nuclear deal.</p> <p>On Saturday, Iran's Parliament placed largely symbolic sanctions on 51 Americans, many of them prominent political and military officials, for “terrorism” and “human rights violations,” in retaliation for the U.S. assassination of Iran's top commander, Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, two years ago.</p> <p>Jake Sullivan, the U.S. national security adviser, then warned that Iran would “face severe consequences” if it attacked any Americans, including any of the 51 people hit with the sanctions. And American officials generally have been quite circumspect in their appraisals of the state of the negotiations on the nuclear deal.</p> <p>Yet on the same day that Iran issued the sanctions, the country's top nuclear negotiator, Ali Bagheri Kani, said outstanding differences in the deal were diminishing and that talks were moving forward, the official news agency IRNA reported.</p> <p>Symbolic acts of sanctioning individuals and issuing sharply worded statements are nothing new in the long and troubled relationship between Tehran and Washington. But the recent exchanges are noteworthy</p>

because they come during a negotiation that both sides want to complete successfully, but without appearing to make significant concessions.

Former President Donald Trump [withdrew from the nuclear deal](#) in 2018 and imposed tough economic sanctions cutting off most of Iran's oil revenues and international financial transactions. Mr. Trump's goal was to pressure Iran into a deal that reached beyond its nuclear program, restricting its ballistic missiles and regional political and military activities.

The Biden administration initially wanted to return to the original deal while following the Trump blueprint on missiles and foreign policies, but has now indicated it would accept a return to the 2015 accord without those strings attached.

The Iranians, for their part, said they would entertain only a return to the original accord, but initially [demanded the lifting of all sanctions](#) imposed by Mr. Trump and guarantees that a future American president would not withdraw from the deal. But Tehran has softened those demands as the negotiations have progressed in Vienna.

Despite all the posturing, the impetus for reaching a deal renewing the 2015 treaty remains strong for both sides.

The Biden administration needs a foreign policy success, particularly after the chaotic exit from Afghanistan, and has said it prefers a diplomatic resolution to the nuclear standoff over military confrontation. Iran, too, having survived the maximum pressure policy of the Trump years, is keen to avoid conflict, gain sanctions relief and revive its ailing economy.

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, signaled an indirect endorsement of talks with the U.S. in a speech on Monday when he said the Islamic Republic "holding talks and negotiating with the enemy at certain junctures does not mean surrendering."

Yet neither side wants to seem too eager to compromise, which would risk appearing weak.

"Iran appears to be buying time under the cover of continued diplomacy," said Ali Vaez, the Iran director of the International Crisis Group. "Something's got to give. Otherwise, we are really on a collision course."

The recent jousting between Tehran and Washington is linked to Iran's commemoration on Jan. 3 of the two-year anniversary of the U.S. assassination of General Suleimani. In speech after speech during the ceremonies, Iranian officials threatened revenge against American officials — even though Iran had [retaliated five days after the assassination](#) with a ballistic missile strike on an American military facility in Iraq.

Ebrahim Raisi, the newly elected hard-line Iranian president, said that former President Trump and his secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, should stand trial in an impartial court and face "ghesas," a term that in Islamic jurisprudence means an "eye for an eye." Otherwise, he warned, people would take their own revenge.

The head of the Quds Forces, Gen. Esmail Gaani, issued a broader threat in his speech at a ceremony for his predecessor, General Suleimani. "We will facilitate revenge on Americans in any place, even their own homes and by people close to them, even if we are not present," he said in a video of the speech.

Immediately following the anniversary, Iranian-backed Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria stepped up attacks on U.S. interests.

Over a four-day period, they unleashed a series of rocket and drone attacks on a U.S. military base in western Iraq and on the living quarters of State Department employees at the Baghdad airport, according

to the Iraqi military and an official with the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition based in Baghdad, who asked not to be named because he was not authorized to speak publicly.

He said U.S. air defenses shot down all the rockets and drones aimed at the base and the State Department facility, the Baghdad Diplomatic Support Center, before they could do any damage, much less inflict casualties.

In northeastern Syria, artillery rounds were fired at a Syrian-Kurdish-led base with U.S. advisers, [according to the U.S.-led coalition](#), which issued a statement blaming the attacks on “Iran-supported malign actors.”

Yet, at the same time that Tehran’s proxies were launching the attacks, Iranian officials were expressing a surprisingly optimistic view of the talks in Vienna, now in their eighth round, while the State Department was offering a more measured assessment.

An adviser to Iran’s Foreign Ministry said he believed a deal could be reached before mid-February, which would coincide with the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Iranian negotiators under Mr. Raisi, the new president — who had criticized his predecessor, Hassan Rouhani, for being too soft — made an important concession to get things rolling by agreeing to work from a draft agreement worked out with Mr. Rouhani’s team, two people familiar with the talks said.

Under that agreement, the U.S. would lift all sanctions related to the nuclear deal (while keeping those for human rights and other issues) and Iran would return to its technical commitments regarding its nuclear program under the old treaty. But critical sticking points remain, such as which sanctions would be lifted and when, and in return for what specific actions by Iran, with an as-yet-to-be determined timeline that would sequence the steps.

Washington’s outlook has been more cautious than Tehran’s. Two senior State Department officials noted some modest progress in the talks, gaining a bit more ground beyond where the negotiations had paused in June. But both officials emphasized, without going into specifics, that major points still needed to be addressed. All the while, patience is wearing thin at the State Department.

“I’m not going to put a time limit on it or give you the number of meters remaining on the runway, except to say, ‘Yes, it is getting very, very, very short,’” Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken told reporters late last year.

While the United States could still offer Iran more sanctions relief, Mr. Vaez from the International Crisis Group said, officials in Tehran have failed to persuade Western negotiators that they are serious about coming back into full compliance with the 2015 accord.

Iran’s foreign minister, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, indicated that Iran may have softened its initial demand for the removal of all sanctions imposed after Mr. Trump exited the deal, including those related to human rights.

But in an interview last week with Al Jazeera, Mr. Amir Abdollahian said that at this stage in Vienna, Iran was pursuing “the removal of sanctions” related only to the original nuclear deal and looking to complete sanctions removal sometime in the future.

While the two sides rumble on toward some sort of resolution, there is no doubting the seriousness of the negotiation, Mr. Vaez warned.

Iran has long maintained that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes. But if the talks fail, he said, its [efforts at enriching uranium since the U.S. exited the nuclear deal](#) have put it in a position to move toward weaponization very quickly.

HEADLINE	01/12 WHO warns: omicron still dangerous virus
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/12/world/who-omicron-coronavirus.html
GIST	<p>The World Health Organization admonished countries not to relax their guard against the coronavirus pandemic, just because the Omicron variant tends not to cause hospitalizations and deaths as often as earlier variants did.</p> <p>“We must not allow this virus a free ride, or wave the white flag, especially when so many people around the world remain unvaccinated,” Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director general of the World Health Organization, said Wednesday at a news conference in Geneva.</p> <p>Since Omicron was first detected in late November, it raced across the planet, outpacing even some of the best tracking efforts. The daily average for new, known global cases has set records every day since the start of the year, as much of the world remains unvaccinated. Over the past week, a staggering average of 2.6 million new cases a day has been reported and the world surpassed 300 million known cases, according to the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University.</p> <p>Those figures are surely an undercount, given lack of access to testing and that the results of home tests often are not always reported officially. In addition, some public health experts — like Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the U.S. government’s top infectious disease expert — are encouraging less of an emphasis on case counts and more focus on hospitalization numbers.</p> <p>“Let’s be clear: While Omicron causes less severe disease than Delta, it remains a dangerous virus, particularly for those who are unvaccinated,” Dr. Tedros said. Referring to the pandemic’s recent global toll, he said, “Almost 50,000 deaths a week is 50,000 deaths too many. Learning to live with this virus does not mean we can, or should, accept this number of deaths.”</p> <p>In some countries, the leap in new cases has prompted new curfews, lockdowns and restrictions, as well as discussions about making vaccinations and booster shots mandatory. But many more countries have not significantly changed course, and some are finding that new virus control measures cannot overcome stiff political opposition.</p> <p>The French government said on Wednesday that it would keep the country open despite record-shattering virus cases, growing public frustration over testing protocols in schools and the threat of strikes by teachers over Covid safety.</p> <p>The new coalition government in Germany postponed a parliamentary debate on a proposed national vaccine mandate, after large demonstrations in Düsseldorf, Frankfurt and Magdeburg and rallies in many other cities against pandemic measures imposed to slow the spread of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>Leaders in India have been offering mixed messages holding packed political rallies at the same time that they order curfews and business closures. Australia recently relaxed its isolation rules to reduce labor shortages and strain on testing facilities.</p> <p>And in the United States, a group of health experts who advised President Biden’s transition team published a series of articles last week calling on the White House to reset its response to Covid in a way that would acknowledge the “new normal” of living with the virus indefinitely.</p> <p>Worldwide, though, about 72 percent of shots that have gone into arms have been administered in high- and upper-middle-income countries, according to the Our World in Data project at the University of Oxford. Only 1 percent of doses have been administered in low-income countries.</p> <p>“A big part of the problem is we’ve made it twice as hard, or three times as hard, for low-income countries, many of them, to be able to achieve high coverage,” Dr. Bruce Aylward, a senior W.H.O. adviser, said at the news conference.</p>

	Dr. Aylward said wealthy nations had been slow and stingy in sharing vaccines and other vital supplies with the rest of the world. "What we did share was a lot of misinformation," he said.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/13 Delta: 8,000 employees Covid positive
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Business/wireStory/delta-loses-408-million-8000-employees-hit-infection-82240726
GIST	<p>Delta Air Lines lost \$408 million in the final quarter of 2021, dragged down by a COVID-19 surge that rocked the airline in December, and the carrier predicted Thursday that it will suffer one more quarterly loss before travel perks up in spring and summer.</p> <p>CEO Ed Bastian said 8,000 employees have contracted COVID-19 over the last four weeks. Sick workers and winter storms have led to more than 2,200 cancelled flights since Dec. 24.</p> <p>Cancellations have dropped sharply in the past few days, but the spate of spiked flights cost the airline \$75 million and the latest outbreak, caused by the omicron variant of the virus, is expected to push the industry's recovery back by two months.</p> <p>"I don't think we're going to see a pickup in bookings or travel during January and probably the first part of February," Bastian said in an interview. "It's always the weakest part of the year, and it's going to be that much weaker because of omicron. We need confidence in travel returning once the virus recedes."</p> <p>Delta expects omicron infections to peak over the next few days and then decline rapidly as it has in South Africa and — more slowly — in the United Kingdom.</p> <p>Omicron has halted a long, slow rise in travel and thrown it into reverse. So far in January, the number of people flying in the U.S. is down 20% from same month in 2019 — worse than the 16% declines in November and December.</p> <p>Earlier this week, United Airlines CEO Scott Kirby sent a letter to employees saying that 3,000 employees had tested positive for COVID-19. On a single day at one day alone at Newark, nearly a third of United's staff called out sick and the airline cut back on scheduled flights systemwide.</p> <p>Both airlines have about 74,000 workers.</p> <p>Delta expects to lose money in January and February and for the first quarter as a whole.</p> <p>The airline expects first-quarter revenue to be 72% to 74% of pre-pandemic levels — about the same as the fourth quarter. Costs are expected to rise sharply. Costs other than fuel will jump about 15% from 2019, and jet fuel is getting pricier too.</p> <p>However, the Atlanta company expects to return to profitability in March — when spring break could help fill planes, especially if coronavirus infections are falling — and for the rest of 2022.</p> <p>Delta believes it will hire several thousand people this year, Bastian said, as it rebuilds from the pandemic and prepares for what it hopes will be a busy summer. The company set aside \$108 million for special profit-sharing payments of \$1,250 for each current employee.</p> <p>The thank-you payment to employees comes as a new skirmish breaks out between largely non-union Delta and the nation's largest union of flight attendants. The union accuses Delta of pressuring employees to return to work too soon after contracting the virus.</p> <p>Delta lobbied the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last month to reduce the recommended quarantine period from 10 days to 5 days for vaccinated people who contract the virus, with Bastian and other Delta officials saying that the 10-day standard may significantly impact our workforce and operations."</p>

	<p>The CDC made the change, with its director, Rochelle Walensky, explaining on NPR that “we started to see challenges with ... airline flights and other areas.”</p> <p>Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants, said Delta lobbied the CDC after it was slow to offer incentive pay for employees to pick up extra work during the holidays as infections spread.</p> <p>Delta disputes the union's claims, and the airline's top lawyer sent a cease-and-desist letter to the union last week, accusing the group of making “false and defamatory” statements about the company.</p> <p>Delta's fourth-quarter loss compared with a profit of \$1.1 billion in the same quarter before the pandemic.</p> <p>Excluding losses on some investments and profit-sharing, Delta earned \$170 million, or 22 cents per share. That easily topped per-share projections on Wall Street of 14 cents, according to a FactSet survey.</p> <p>Revenue was \$9.47 billion, down 17% from \$11.44 billion in the fourth quarter of 2019, but well above the \$9.02 billion predicted by industry analysts.</p> <p>Shares of Delta Air Lines Inc. rose more than 2% before the opening bell Thursday and most major airlines were trending higher.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Rubble brings opportunity, risk Gaza Strip
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/rubble-brings-opportunity-risk-war-scarred-gaza-82238785
GIST	<p>GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip -- The Gaza Strip has few jobs, little electricity and almost no natural resources. But after four bruising wars with Israel in just over a decade, it has lots of rubble.</p> <p>Local businesses are now finding ways to cash in on the chunks of smashed concrete, bricks and debris left behind by years of conflict. In a territory suffering from a chronic shortage of construction materials, a bustling recycling industry has sprouted up, providing income to a lucky few but raising concerns that the refurbished rubble is substandard and unsafe.</p> <p>“It’s a lucrative business,” said Naji Sarhan, deputy housing minister in the territory’s Hamas-led government. The challenge, he said, is regulating the use of recycled rubble in construction.</p> <p>“We are trying to control and correct the misuse of these materials,” he said.</p> <p>Israel and Gaza’s Hamas rulers have gone to war four times since the Islamic militant group, which opposes Israel's existence, seized control of the territory in 2007. The most recent fighting was in May. Israeli airstrikes have damaged or leveled tens of thousands of buildings in the fighting.</p> <p>The United Nations Development Program says it worked with the local private sector to remove some 2.5 million metric tons of rubble left behind from wars in 2009, 2012 and 2014. Gaza’s Housing Ministry says the 11-day war in May left an additional 270,000 tons.</p> <p>The UNDP has worked on rubble recycling since Israel's 2005 withdrawal from Gaza. It also has played a key role in the latest cleanup, removing about 110,000 tons, or more than one-third of the rubble. That includes the Al-Jawhara building, a high-rise in downtown Gaza City that was damaged so heavily by Israeli missiles that it was deemed beyond repair. Israel said the building housed Hamas military intelligence operations.</p> <p>Over the past three months, excavators lifted atop the building systematically demolished it floor by floor. Just one floor remains and the construction crews are now removing the building’s foundations and pillars on the ground.</p>

In a common scene outside every building destroyed by the war, workers separated twisted rebar iron from the debris, to be straightened out and re-used in things like boundary walls and ground slabs.

Israel and Egypt have maintained a crippling blockade on Gaza for the past 15 years, restricting the entry of badly needed construction materials. Israel says such restrictions are needed to prevent Hamas from diverting goods like concrete and steel for military use. Since 2014, it has allowed some imports under the supervision of the United Nations. But thousands of homes need to be repaired or rebuilt, and shortages are rampant.

The UNDP has put tight restrictions on its recycling effort. It says that renewed rubble is not safe enough for use in building homes and buildings. Instead, it allows it to be used only for road projects.

“We do not recommend any of the rubble to be used for any reconstruction as such, because it is not a good quality material for reconstruction,” said Yvonne Helle, a UNDP spokeswoman. She said the metal is separated and returned to the buildings' owners because it “also has a value.”

On a recent day, trucks trickled into a lowland in central Gaza near the Israeli frontier, carrying large chunks from the Al-Jawhara tower. The site, adjacent to a mountain of garbage serving as Gaza's main landfill, is overseen by the UNDP.

A wheel loader filled a bucket with debris that was tossed into a crushing machine. It produces large pieces of aggregate that the site supervisor said could be used as a base under the asphalt layer in street construction. Because of safety concerns, they are not allowed to crush the rubble into smaller aggregate that could be used in house construction.

The trucks then return to Gaza City where the UNDP is funding a road project, providing a much-needed source of work in a territory with nearly 50% unemployment.

The U.N. road projects have provided a partial solution for the rubble problem, but most of Gaza's debris continues to make its way into the desperate private sector.

Sarhan, the Housing Ministry official, said it is forbidden to use recycled rubble in major construction. But he said enforcing that ban is extremely difficult and much of the material is creeping back into the local construction markets.

Ahmed Abu Asaker, an engineer from the Gaza Contractors' Union, said many brick factories use the local aggregate, which he said is not a “great concern.” He said there have been a few isolated cases of it being mixed into concrete, which is far more dangerous.

There have not been any reports of building collapses. But Abu Asaker estimates that thousands of homes have been built with materials from recycled rubble since 2014.

Just north of the UNDP processing center, about 50 rubble crushers were hard at work at a private facility on a recent day, producing different kinds of aggregate.

The most popular items are the “sesame,” which is used for making cinder blocks, and the “lentil-like” grind sent to cement-mixing factories.

Around the crushers were mounds of small aggregate, with tiny pieces of shredded plastic, cloth and wood clearly mixed in.

Antar al-Katatni, who runs a nearby brick factory, says he makes bricks using the sesame aggregate. He acknowledged the material has impurities like sand, but there is an upside. “It makes more bricks,” he said.

He said engineers do not buy his blocks for internationally funded projects, because they are not allowed to do so, “but poor people do.”

	<p>A brick costs two shekels, or about 65 cents, when it's made with higher quality Israeli-imported aggregate. The price for the ones he makes are slightly cheaper, at 1.7 or 1.8 shekels. When a typical project might require several thousand bricks, even the small price difference can add up for a poor family.</p> <p>Sarhan said that given the blockade and Gaza's numerous other problems, it is difficult to regulate the gray market industry.</p> <p>"We cannot patrol or control every citizen," he said. "That's why you may find someone used recycled rubble here or there."</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	01/12 Study: lower income groups, air pollution
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/communities-large-black-asian-hispanic-latino-populations-exposed/story?id=82199331
GIST	<p>Marginalized communities, especially those with higher-than-average minority populations, are more likely to be exposed to air pollution in the U.S., according to new research.</p> <p>Communities with large populations of Black, Asian and Hispanic or Latino residents have been found to experience more exposure to fine particulate pollutants than other areas of the U.S. with higher-than-average populations of white and Native American residents, according to a study published Wednesday in Nature. Fine particulate matters of diameters smaller than 2.5 micrometers (PM2.5) have been identified as the fifth-highest risk factor for global mortality.</p> <p>In 2016, the average concentration of fine particulate matter to which Black populations were exposed was 13.7% higher than that affecting white populations and 36.3% higher than that affecting Native American populations, according to the study.</p> <p>Conversely, the study found that the communities mostly up made of white and Native American residents were found to have been "consistently exposed" to lower-than-average levels of pollution.</p> <p>Researchers from Harvard University combined pollution data with the census data from 2000 and 2016, which included information such as zip codes and median household income, to find out how pollution exposure levels varied across different racial and ethnic groups, Abdulrahman Jbaily, a former postdoctoral research fellow at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and co-author of the study, told ABC News.</p> <p>The scientists found that even though there was a favorable trend in pollution reduction over the years, it was accompanied by persisting disparities among both racial and ethnic groups and the income groups, and the disparities across the racial and ethnic groups were "much more apparent than" those across the income groups, Jbaily said.</p> <p>Between 2004 and 2016, areas with lower income groups have been consistently exposed to slightly higher pollutant levels than those with higher income groups, according to the study.</p> <p>Researchers also found that, up to 2016, there were still several populations living below safety standards on PM2.5 set by the Environmental Protection Agency, and that the populations living above the standards were likely not equally distributed across all ethnic groups, Jbaily said, adding that the study did not look into the drivers of the pollution.</p> <p>The poor have historically borne the burden of environmental problems like pollution, climate justice experts told ABC News.</p> <p>Racialized and lower-income communities are dealing with the consequences of living near undesirable locations, such as industrial complexes, highways running next door to their neighborhoods and even</p>

	<p>outpatient facilities for drug use, Cheryl Teelucksingh, Ph.D, professor of environmental justice and chair of the sociology department at Ryerson University in Toronto, told ABC News.</p> <p>They're often isolated there after decades residential patterns such as redlining and gentrification and the fact that city centers are often expensive, Stefanie Chambers, a professor of political science at Trinity College with an expertise in environmental justice, told ABC News.</p> <p>"You need to have a fair amount of financial resources in order to live in particular neighborhoods," Teelucksingh said.</p> <p>Lower-income communities are also more vulnerable to pollution because they lack the time and resources to attend procedural meetings at city hall or hire lawyers and lobbyists to fight on their behalf against land being used for undesirable reasons so close to their homes, the experts said.</p> <p>"Those individuals have a hard time making political headway and advocating for themselves and the health of their families and children," Chambers said. "It's not that they don't care, of course. It's that they lack the resources often to influence the political system."</p> <p>As global warming continues, poor communities will also bear the brunt of the destruction, the experts said.</p> <p>Vulnerable members of society are already dying by the dozens in extreme temperatures events, such as the freeze in Texas last February and the multiple record-breaking heat waves in the Pacific Northwest last summer. As storms get stronger, flooding gets worse, already failing infrastructures are destroyed and drinking water is diminished, the poorest communities around the world will experience the consequences first and the most heavily.</p> <p>Jbaily said he hopes the findings help to guide policymakers to move toward not only reducing pollution but targeting climate justice at the same time.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	01/12 Midwest faces winter storm; Northeast cold
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/winter-storm-headed-midwest-moving-northeast-early-week/story?id=82226793
GIST	<p>A winter storm is expected to bring up to 8 inches of snow across the Midwest beginning Thursday evening.</p> <p>Winter storm watches are in effect for parts of South Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa into Friday.</p> <p>The system is expected to move southeast this weekend.</p> <p>Some southern states, including Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina, could see snow and ice.</p> <p>The storm may then move up the East Coast, potentially bringing wintry impacts to the Northeast Sunday night through Monday.</p> <p>In the meantime, the Northeast, which saw its coldest day in nearly three years on Tuesday, will experience another cold blast Saturday, with wind chills plunging below zero in New York City and across New England.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	01/12 Georgia: guaranteed income Black women
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/guaranteed-income-experiment-black-women-aims-tackle-racial/story?id=82073348

When Michelle Lockhart was a teenager in Atlanta, she had to work two jobs -- as a camp counselor and fast-food worker -- to take care of her family.

She said her mother became disabled at that time due to a brain tumor, but it took months of cutting through red tape to qualify for desperately needed federal assistance.

If they had gotten more help then, "I could have focused on going to college and doing what people my age were doing: going to prom and enjoying their teen years," Lockhart, now 41, told ABC News.

In the early months of this year, [650 Black women across Georgia](#) -- a demographic hit particularly hard by poverty -- will get some of that help. Payments of \$850 per month will roll out over the next two years in one of the biggest guaranteed income experiments in the country. Some participants in the \$13 million initiative may receive lump sum payments totaling the same amount they would have received over two years. For now, the process of inviting and selecting participants is ongoing.

The program will run alongside Atlanta's [own basic income program](#) which plans to serve about 300 residents that live below 200% of the federal poverty line. The initiative is currently working on making its first round of payments to the starting cohort of 25 participants, according to Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms' office.

Guaranteed income programs like these have seen a resurgence in recent years amid attempts to address racial and economic equality and reduce poverty. The scope can be either targeted or universal. They have had successes, but some critics say these initiatives have to be multifaceted to work and address the nuances of poverty. Others claim it will stop people from working (though the claim [has been debunked](#)) or be too expensive to maintain.

As a community advocate and member of the [Old Fourth Ward Economic Security Task Force](#), Lockhart said many of her neighbors continue to experience similar hardships, despite working day and night in an effort to escape poverty.

"Everybody's on this hamster wheel," Lockhart said. "They're working two or three jobs ... they're working low wage jobs, but they're still in poverty."

Burden on communities of color

Black residents in Atlanta are more four times as likely to be living under the federal poverty line than their white neighbors, with 46% of Black households earning below \$25,000 a year, according to [recent research by the Old Fourth Ward Economic Security Task Force](#).

Some 38% of Black women and 26% of Black men in the city are living in poverty, compared to 8% of white women and 5% of white men in the same city, the task force reports.

"We're working, we're tired, we're stressed," Lockhart said. "With an extra \$850 a month, people will be able to enjoy the sunlight and will be able to spend more time with their babies."

Hope Wollensack, the executive director of the Georgia Resilience & Opportunity Fund, said the program is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of what is needed to address inequality.

"It'll take a multifaceted approach -- and probably many different policies -- to even begin to address the racial wealth gap," she said. "But we do know that stabilizing one's income can be a powerful tool not only to improve one's material circumstances in the short term and to improve quality of life and opportunities but also to enable individuals across the board to plan for the long term."

The program, called "In Her Hands," was shaped by discussions and surveys from community members that examined the causes of economic insecurity and wealth disparities in the city.

The project, run by the Georgia Resilience & Opportunity Fund, is an initiative from the Atlanta City Council, as well as the nonprofit cash assistance service GiveDirectly. It will begin rolling out in the Old Fourth Ward, the childhood neighborhood of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., who was a fierce advocate for universal basic income as a way of [addressing racial wealth inequities](#).

"We have economic insecurity that is pervasive and it's the result of decades of policies, if not more, that have made it harder for the majority of Americans to get ahead," Wollensack said.

The ability to access quality education, transportation and higher-paying jobs, the burden of childcare or predatory debt -- factors like these, Wollensack said, are also more likely to burden communities of color.

Poverty and food insecurity can impact a community's physical and mental health, and is considered one "of the most serious and costly health problems," according to the [Food Research & Action Center](#), a national nonprofit research organization working to eradicate poverty.

'Hard to budget from zero'

Cash assistance and guaranteed income have been repeatedly proven to be a major force against poverty, according to researchers at the [Columbia University, Center on Poverty & Social Policy](#).

Past studies and research has shown evidence that basic income experiments [improved the happiness](#) and [health](#) of its recipients and appeared to [affect crime rates](#) in the regions where it was implemented.

The program won't offer any financial literacy courses nor advise how participants will use the money. Wollensack says that, in surveying and researching the community and its financial needs, people can be trusted to make the right choices using their resources, but don't have a lot of resources to start with.

"It's hard to budget from zero," Wollensack said. "In fact, we've seen oftentimes community members with some of the fewest resources are the most resilient and resourceful."

She added, "Instead of viewing communities that may have experienced cash shortfalls as a deficit, we actually know and believe that these communities were huge assets."

Lockhart said she expects to see the effects of the income boost almost instantaneously.

She says that when the COVID-19 stimulus reached the bank accounts of Old Fourth Ward residents, she saw a mood shift among her neighbors. She says people were out and chatting with neighbors, engaging with neighborhood businesses -- the weight of financial stress lessened for just a while.

"They want to get out and work. They want to start their own businesses. They want to spend more time with their children," Lockhart said "This will help slow people down a little bit so that they can focus and center themselves and center their energy right."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 NATO rejects Russia guarantee demands
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/nato-rejects-russian-demands-security-guarantees-latest-round/story?id=82226913
GIST	<p>A new round of talks between Russia and NATO countries aimed at averting a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine have again ended with little progress, with the two sides still at an impasse over Russia's demands for security guarantees.</p> <p>Russia met with 30 NATO member states at the alliance's headquarters in Brussels on Wednesday, the second of three diplomatic meetings organized this week in Europe between Russia and Western countries amid fears raised by Russia's massing of 100,000 troops on Ukraine's border.</p>

In Wednesday's talks, NATO offered Russia to hold a series of meetings to discuss arms control and other confidence building measures in an attempt to persuade it to lower tensions around Ukraine. The alliance's secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, said it had proposed talks on limiting missile deployments and troop exercises as well as how to improve communication and transparency. He told reporters afterward that Russia said it needed to time to consider the offer, but it had not rejected it out of hand.

"We are ready to sit down," Stoltenberg told journalists. "And we hope Russia is ready to sit down and hold these meetings."

But NATO unanimously rebuffed Moscow's core demands for formal guarantees that Ukraine will never join NATO and that the alliance will pull back its forces from countries in Eastern Europe that joined after the Cold War. Russia and the United States held talks on Monday in Geneva where Moscow pressed those demands and which the U.S. rejected as impossible.

NATO and the U.S. said they would never compromise on what they called the alliance's "core principles," after Russia's negotiators, Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko and Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin, presented the same demands again at Wednesday's meeting.

"Together, the United States and our NATO allies made clear we will not slam the door shut on NATO's open-door policy," U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, who led the U.S. delegation, said after the meeting, calling them a "non-starter."

But while Russia's key demand was again rejected, the door to a diplomatic solution remains open, U.S. and NATO officials said.

"There was no commitment to deescalate, nor was there a statement that there would not be," Sherman added, even offering some praise for the Russian delegation for sitting "through nearly four hours of a meeting where 30 nations spoke -- and they did -- which is not an easy thing to do. I'm glad they did it."

She and Stoltenberg said Russia now had a choice to make whether to engage with dialogue, saying she hoped the Russian negotiators would now go back to President Vladimir Putin and they would choose "peace and security."

Russia [made the sweeping demands](#) over NATO in two draft treaties in December after building up troops close to Ukraine for months. That buildup, along with bellicose rhetoric and plans for "internal sabotage," according to U.S. officials, raised fears that Putin may be preparing to launch a renewed attack on the country [after he seized Crimea](#) and launched a separatist war in 2014.

Russia has denied it is planning to attack Ukraine, despite the buildup on its border. Amid the diplomatic efforts, it staged live fire exercises on Tuesday with 3,000 troops and hundreds of tanks in three regions neighboring Ukraine.

The U.S. and NATO have hoped that Russia might accept more modest offers, such as limiting missile deployments and troop exercises. But Russia's negotiator, Grushko, insisted again Wednesday that Russia could accept nothing less than the guarantees on Ukraine and NATO, calling it "imperative." No progress on arms control or confidence-building measures could be made without progress on Moscow's core demands, he told reporters afterward.

Grushko said Russia was now waiting for NATO and the U.S. to send written responses to the Russian proposals and that it would then make a decision on how to proceed.

Russia has complained for decades about NATO expansion into countries formerly dominated by Moscow under the Soviet Union. The Kremlin now alleges that NATO assistance to Ukraine means the former Soviet country is becoming a defacto part of the alliance. The U.S. and NATO say Moscow's demand is an attempt to reimpose its Soviet-era sphere of influence on Eastern Europe and that it violates a fundamental right for countries to choose their security alliances.

Grushko said deescalation was "absolutely possible," but he warned that the alliance's enlargement into Eastern Europe had become "unbearable" for Russia, warning if Russia felt threatened it would use "military means."

"We have a range of military-technical measures that we will use if we will feel a real threat to our security," Grushko said. "And we already are feeling it, if they are looking at our territory as a target for guided, offensive weapons. Of course, we cannot agree with that. We will take all necessary measures in order to fend off the threat with military means, if political ones don't work."

But Grushko also spoke positively about the talks, saying for the first time he believed Russia had "managed to convey to the members of the alliance that the situation is unbearable."

Stoltenberg said Russia could not have a veto over Ukraine joining the alliance, saying Russian claims to feel threatened by Ukraine were also wrong.

"Ukraine is a sovereign nation. Ukraine has the right to self-defense," he said. "Ukraine is not a threat to Russia. To say that Ukraine is a threat to Russia is to put the whole thing upside down."

Western officials have been trying to understand whether the threat of a Russian attack on Ukraine is real or a bluff to strengthen Moscow's hands as it makes its demands. Sherman suggested that remained an open question, perhaps even for the Kremlin itself.

"Everyone, Russia most of all, will have to decide whether they really are about security, in which case they should engage, or whether this was all a pretext," she said. "And they may not even know yet."

While the buildup, including the new live-fire exercises Wednesday, could still be a negotiating tactic, some Western officials and independent experts also worry that Russia might be engaging in the talks intending for them to fail, so as to use that as a pretext for a military intervention.

"The United States and our allies and partners are not dragging our feet. It is Russia that has to make a stark choice: deescalation and diplomacy, or confrontation and consequences," Sherman said. "If Russia walks away, however, it will be quite apparent they were never serious about pursuing diplomacy at all."

On Thursday, the talks will move to a third round at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, a Cold War-era forum that includes all of the continent's countries, the U.S. and Canada and several in Central Asia. Those talks are expected to yield even fewer results, with 57 member states participating in an open dialogue.

The Kremlin has suggested it will make a decision whether it is worth continuing talks following this week's meetings. Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, on Tuesday said Moscow did not "see a substantial reason for optimism" so far but that for now it was not drawing any conclusions.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/11 Gene found in Georgia water global threat?
SOURCE	https://phys.org/news/2022-01-gene-georgia-global-threat.html
GIST	<p>A gene that causes bacteria to be resistant to one of the world's most important antibiotics, colistin, has been detected in sewer water in Georgia. The presence of the MCR-9 gene is a major concern for public health because it causes antimicrobial resistance, a problem that the World Health Organization has declared "one of the top 10 global public health threats facing humanity."</p> <p>Researchers from the University of Georgia's Center for Food Safety (CFS) collected sewage water from an urban setting in Georgia to test for the MCR gene in naturally present bacteria. Led by College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences assistant professor Issmat Kassem, whose research focuses on</p>

MCR's presence around the world, the team was surprised at how quickly they detected MCR—they found evidence of the gene in the first sample they took.

Kassem said that demonstrates that the gene is becoming established in the U.S.

The bacteria where the gene was found, *Morganella morganii*, added further concern for Kassem. This marked the first time that MCR was found in *M. morganii*, which is problematic because it is a bacteria not often tested by researchers. This means that the problem could be considerably more widespread than initially thought.

The spread of MCR in agriculture, imports, travel

It was previously believed that agriculture was a driving factor in the spread of MCR. Nations such as China and India use the colistin antibiotic in livestock. Colistin is considered a "last resort" antibiotic because it can kill infections that other antibiotics cannot. Its frequent use means that some bacteria are becoming resistant to it. This means that if people or animals contract a strain of colistin-resistant bacteria, there are potentially no medications that can treat their infection. They face extreme, invasive health measures and possible death.

Colistin is banned in the U.S. for use in food animals and it was previously thought that this measure would help slow the spread of antimicrobial resistance to colistin in the country. However, MCR can be spread through global travel and the import of foods from other countries. Results of the CFS study prove that the U.S. is no less susceptible to the threat than other nations around the world.

Further complicating the issue is the way that the gene is spread. It transmits in plasmids, which are strands of DNA found inside cells that can replicate on their own, independent of the cell. A plasmid with antimicrobial resistance found in one type of bacteria can transmit to other types of bacteria. This means that bacteria like *E. coli* and *Salmonella* that commonly cause outbreaks in humans can potentially carry MCR, turning them from treatable illnesses to potentially deadly infections.

How worried should we be about the MCR-9 gene?

Kassem said that taken all together, the global threat of antimicrobial resistance, the presence of MCR in Georgia, that it was found inside a bacterium that is often overlooked, and that it occurred even without the use of colistin in U.S. agriculture is a serious problem that requires immediate action on the part of many industries including research, healthcare and government to work together toward a solution.

"If we don't tackle it right now, we are jeopardizing human and animal medicine as we know it and that can have huge repercussions on health and the economy," Kassem said. "It's a dangerous problem that requires attention from multiple sectors for us to be able to tackle it properly."

Because of this urgency, findings from the research were printed in short format manuscript out now in the *Journal of Global Antimicrobial Resistance*. It was funded through a CFS grant and other researchers involved were Jouman Hassan, David Mann, Shaoting Li and Xiangyu Deng.

[Return to Top](#)

Cyber Awareness

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 BioPlus faces lawsuit after network hack
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/breach/after-hack-bioplus-faces-class-action-lawsuit-allegations-into-security-measures
GIST	BioPlus Specialty Pharmacy Services is facing a class-action data breach lawsuit, following its recent disclosure of a weeks-long IT network hack that resulted in the unauthorized access of former and current patient-related information. The lawsuit claims the incident was caused by the vendor's inadequate security measures, while raising further questions into the breach itself.

The breach notice describes the incident as unauthorized access of patient information, while the lawsuit alleges the data was exfiltrated from the network. Further, victims have been given “no assurance... from BioPlus that all personal data or copies of data have been recovered or destroyed.”

What’s interesting is that the public notice does not include the data theft language, but the lawsuit states that the patient “received a notification letter from BioPlus stating that her sensitive PII was taken.”

The hack was discovered by BioPlus on Nov. 11, but the systems’ intrusion began nearly a month earlier on Oct. 25. The investigation that followed confirmed the threat actor accessed a range of information belonging to 350,000 former and current patients.

The exposed data could include dates of birth, health plan member ID numbers, claims data, medical record numbers, diagnoses, and or prescription details. The actors also accessed the Social Security numbers of a smaller subset of patients.

The lawsuit, filed on Jan. 5 in the U.S. Middle District of Florida, Orlando Division, alleges that the data exposed during the hack was leaked on the dark web by the attackers. To make matters worse, a patient named Patricia White claims that BioPlus shouldn’t have had her data in the first place.

White claims her information was entered into the BioPlus system in 2015 due to a “clerical error,” which resulted in her prescription information being sent from her provider to BioPlus instead of her in-network pharmacy. The patient informed the parties of the mistake and canceled the BioPlus service.

However, “her information remained in [BioPlus]’s systems, vulnerable to misuse, until the data breach occurred in November of 2021.”

In addition, one month after the initial hack, White received a notice from her credit monitoring services vendor that her information appeared on the dark web and was shared on a forum for trading sensitive patient information used in health insurance and other banking scams.

The lawsuit asserts the data theft was caused by BioPlus, for its “failure to exercise reasonable care” in securing sensitive protected health information and personally identifiable information. The alleged failures “enabled the hackers to steal the private Information”... and put patients’ “information at a serious, immediate, and ongoing risk.”

As a result of the theft, patients are now burdened with the costs of recovery and “loss of productivity from taking time to address and attempt to ameliorate the release of personal data, as well as emotional grief associated with constant monitoring of personal banking and credit accounts.”

The language surrounding the claims of harm mirror recent breach-related lawsuits, centering around constant monitoring of accounts, ongoing efforts to prevent fraud attempts, and “the imposition of withdrawal and purchase limits on compromised accounts.”

BioPlus did offer a year of free credit monitoring services to all breach victims, the lawsuit takes issue with the lack of assurances about the security of patient information. It further claims that to receive the provided services, the data of individuals would “be shared with third parties and could not guarantee complete privacy of her sensitive PII.”

As a result, the victims who filed the lawsuit chose not to give the vendor any more data to receive those services.

Just one of the two victims who filed the lawsuit provided evidence of data misuse. The breach victims are seeking declaratory relief for claims of negligence, as well as breach of contract, implied contract, and fiduciary duty.

	<p>Lastly, the lawsuit also takes issue with the three month delay in notification. However, the disclosure was well-within the 60-day timeline from discovery to notification, outlined in The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.</p> <p>Breach lawsuits have become increasingly common in the healthcare sector in light of the steady stream of security incidents. At least three other suits were filed in the last month and include Planned Parenthood LA, QRS, and Bansley and Kiener.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 TransCredit exposed financial data records
SOURCE	https://www.hackread.com/transcredit-exposed-financial-data-americans-canadians/
GIST	<p>The IT security researchers at Website Planet discovered a misconfigured database that was owned by TransCredit, a Jacksonville, Florida-based business credit reporting agency for the transportation industry.</p> <p>According to Website Planet's Jeremiah Fowler, the database contained a treasure trove of sensitive financial and personal data of customers including trucking and transportation companies based in Canada and the United States.</p> <p>What data was exposed?</p> <p>In total, the misconfigured database exposed 822,789 records out of which 600,000 were customers' credit records. Other exposed information included the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Full names 2. Tax ID numbers 3. Email addresses 4. Payment histories 5. Banking information 6. Social Security Numbers (SSN) 7. Internal login IDs and passwords 8. EIN (Employer Identification Number) <p><i>And the list goes on...</i></p> <p>Database exposed without password protection</p> <p>According to Website Planet's blog post, the worse part of the incident is that the database was left exposed to public access without any password or security authentication meaning anyone with knowledge of how to find misconfigured databases could have accessed the data.</p> <p>Furthermore, the database was also at risk of being compromised by ransomware gangs who are known for encrypting exposed databases and demanding ransom in return. In 2020, 47% of online MongoDB databases were hacked by ransomware gangs.</p> <p>The real danger to transportation companies is fraud and scams. This database contained enough information to create a range of highly targeted fraud or scams. Criminals armed with insider knowledge could potentially gain trust very easily and companies or individuals would be less suspicious when presented with verifying a Tax ID or other data.</p> <p>Time period</p> <p>Although it is unclear exactly when the database was exposed online or whether it was accessed by a third party with malicious intent, Website Planet told Hackread.com that its researchers discovered the misconfiguration on September 17th 2021. However, details of it were only shared recently.</p> <p>The good news is that TransCredit was quick to respond and secured the database shortly after receiving an alert from Website Planet.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 OceanLotus hackers use web archive files
----------	-------------------------------------------------------

SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/oceanlotus-hackers-turn-to-web-archive-files-to-deploy-backdoors/
GIST	<p>The OceanLotus group of state-sponsored hackers are now using the web archive file format (.MHT and .MHTML) to deploy backdoors to compromised systems.</p> <p>The goal is to evade detection by antivirus solutions tools which are more likely to catch commonly abused document formats and stop the victim from opening them on Microsoft Office.</p> <p>Also tracked as APT32 and SeaLotus, the hackers have shown a tendency in the past to try out less common methods for deploying malware.</p> <p>A report from Netskope Threat Labs shared with Bleeping Computer in advance notes that OceanLotus' campaign using web archive files is still active, although the targeting scope is narrow and despite the command and control (C2) server being disrupted.</p> <p>From trusty RARs to Word macros</p> <p>The attack chain starts with a RAR compression of a 35-65MB large web archive file containing a malicious Word document.</p> <p>To bypass Microsoft Office protection, the actors have set the ZoneID property in the file's metadata to "2", making it appear as if it was downloaded from a trustworthy source.</p> <p>When opening the web archive file with Microsoft Word, the infected document prompts the victim to "Enable Content", which opens the way to executing malicious VBA macro code.</p> <p>After the payload is executed, the VBA code deletes the original Word file and opens the decoy document which serves the victim a bogus error.</p> <p>Backdoor uses Glitch hosting service</p> <p>The payload dropped in the system is a 64-bit DLL that executes every 10 minutes thanks to a scheduled task impersonating a WinRAR update check.</p> <p>The backdoor is injected into the rundll32.exe process running indefinitely in the system memory to evade detection, Netskope notes in its technical report.</p> <p>The malware collects network adapter information, computer name, username, enumerates system directories and files, checks the list of running processes.</p> <p>Once that basic data is gathered, the backdoor compiles everything into a single packages and encrypts the content before it's sent to the C2 server.</p> <p>This server is hosted on Glitch, a cloud hosting and web development collaboration service that is frequently abused for malicious purposes.</p> <p>By using a legitimate cloud hosting service for C2 communication, the actors further reduce the chances of being detected even when network traffic monitoring tools are deployed.</p> <p>Although Glitch took down the C2 URLs identified and reported by Netskope researchers, it's unlikely that this will stop APT32 from creating new ones using different accounts.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	01/12 TellYouThePass ransomware returns
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/tellyouthepass-ransomware-returns-as-a-cross-platform-golang-threat/

<p>GIST</p>	<p>TellYouThePass ransomware has re-emerged as a Golang-compiled malware, making it easier to target more operating systems, macOS and Linux, in particular.</p> <p>The return of this malware strain was noticed last month, when threat actors used it in conjunction with the Log4Shell exploit to target vulnerable machines.</p> <p>Now, a report from CrowdStrike sheds more light on this return, focusing on code-level changes that make it easier to compile for other platforms than Windows.</p> <p>Why Golang?</p> <p>Golang is a programming language first adopted by malware authors in 2019 due to its cross-platform versatility.</p> <p>Furthermore, Golang allows lining dependency libraries into a single binary file, which leads to a smaller footprint of command and control (C2) server communications, thus reducing detection rates.</p> <p>It is also easier to learn than other programming languages, e.g. Python, and features modern debugging and plugin tools that simplify the programming process.</p> <p>A notable example of a successful malware written in Golang is the Glupteba botnet, which was disrupted last month by Google's security specialists.</p> <p>New TellYouThePass samples</p> <p>CrowdStrike analysts report a code similarity of 85% between the Linux and Windows samples of TellYouThePass, showcasing the minimal adjustments needed to make the ransomware run on different operating systems.</p> <p>One noteworthy change in the latest samples of the ransomware is the randomization of the names of all functions apart from the 'main' one, which attempts to thwart analysis.</p> <p>Prior to initiating the encryption routine, TellYouThePass kills tasks and services that could risk the process or result in incomplete encryption, like email clients, database apps, web servers, and document editors.</p> <p>Moreover, some directories are excluded from encryption to prevent rendering the system non-bootable and thus waste any chance to get paid.</p> <p>The ransom note dropped in the recent TellYouThePass infections asks for 0.05 Bitcoin, currently converting to about \$2,150, in exchange for the decryption tool.</p> <p>The encryption scheme uses the RSA-2014 and AES-256 algorithms, and there is no free decryptor available.</p> <p>For the time being, macOS samples have not been spotted.</p>
<p>Return to Top</p>	

<p>HEADLINE</p>	<p>01/12 Public cloud infrastructure to spread RATs</p>
<p>SOURCE</p>	<p>https://www.darkreading.com/cloud/new-campaign-uses-public-cloud-infrastructure-to-spread-rats</p>
<p>GIST</p>	<p>A recently discovered attack campaign uses public cloud infrastructure to deliver variants of commodity RATs Nanocore, Netwire, and AsyncRATs to target users' data, researchers report.</p> <p>This campaign, detected in October, underscores how attackers are increasing their use of cloud technologies to achieve their goals without having to host their own infrastructure, report the Cisco Talos researchers who observed it. It's the latest example of adversaries using cloud services, such as Microsoft Azure and Amazon Web Services, to launch their attacks.</p>

"These types of cloud services like Azure and AWS allow attackers to set up their infrastructure and connect to the internet with minimal time or monetary commitments," researchers wrote in a [blog post](#). The strategy has another benefit, they added: "It also makes it more difficult for defenders to track down the attackers' operations."

Most victims in this case are in the United States, Italy, and Singapore, Cisco Secure product telemetry indicates. The remote administration tools (RATs) they're targeted with are built with multiple features to take control of an environment, remotely execute commands, and steal the target's information.

An attack starts with a phishing email that contains a malicious ZIP attachment. The ZIP file is an ISO image containing the loader in JavaScript, Visual Basic script, or Windows batch file format. The attackers have attempted to trick recipients by disguising the email as a fake invoice file.

The unknown attackers behind this campaign use four levels of obfuscation for the downloader. Each stage of the deobfuscation process leads to decryption methods for the following stages, which ultimately lead to the download of the final payload. When the initial script is executed on a target machine, it connects to a download server that downloads the next stage, which can be hosted on an Azure-based Windows server or an AWS EC2 instance, researchers said.

To deliver the malware, the attackers registered multiple malicious subdomains using DuckDNS, a free dynamic DNS service that allows a user to create subdomains and maintain the records using the DuckDNS scripts. Some of the malicious subdomains resolve to the download server on Azure Cloud; others resolve to the servers operated as command-and-control (C2) for RATs.

"It's just a great example of the challenges enterprises face: malicious email, using an obscure attachment and multiple layers of obfuscation to deliver some sort of remote access capability," says Nick Biasini, head of outreach at Talos. "This is what enterprises are facing today, and this is an example of many of the techniques we commonly observed in one single campaign."

The payloads seen in this attack are commodity RATs commonly used in other campaigns. One of these is Nanocore, an executable first spotted in the wild in 2013. Another is NetwireRAT, a known threat that is used to steal passwords, login credentials, and credit card data. It is able to remotely execute commands and collect file system information.

AsyncRAT, the third payload, is designed to remotely monitor and control target machines via encrypted connections.

In this campaign, attackers use the AsyncRAT client by configuring it to connect to the C2 server and give them remote access to a victim's device. They can then steal data using some of its features, which include a keylogger, screen recorded, and system configuration manager.

Biasini says a victim will typically receive a single payload; however, Talos researchers have seen cases in which multiple RATs or other payloads are dropped onto a target system.

A Stronger Focus on Cloud

Researchers often see attackers abuse public cloud infrastructure, Biasini says. Part of the reason is attackers are opportunistic — they'll use any platform that can to help them achieve their goals. Azure and AWS are both major cloud platforms, so it's unsurprising that attackers would look to these, as well as a variety of other cloud providers, to use in their campaigns.

The growth in their use of public cloud also points to another trend of access being a primary goal, he adds.

"Ransomware cartels and associated affiliates are making huge sums of money ransoming their victims, [and] this type of remote access can and is sold to these groups," Biasini explains. "Not all malicious

	<p>actors want to operate in that space, but with the money to be made, it's financially advantageous to just sell the initial access to one of these groups."</p> <p>Attackers aren't only abusing cloud infrastructure. New research shows two-thirds of all malware spread to enterprise networks last year originated in cloud apps, including Google Drive and OneDrive. Today's organizations are more likely to be hit with malware downloads from cloud applications than from any other source — a shift experts attribute to the convenience and cost that benefit attackers.</p> <p>Cisco Talos researchers advised organizations to inspect their outgoing connections to cloud services for malicious traffic. Defenders should also monitor traffic to their business and implement rules around the script execution policies for their endpoints, they noted.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	01/12 Cyber Command: MuddyWater Iranian intel
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/us-cyber-command-links-muddywater-to-iranian-intelligence/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>United States Cyber Command said on Wednesday that the hacking group known as MuddyWater is linked to Iranian intelligence.</p> <p>"MuddyWater is an Iranian threat group; previously, industry has reported that MuddyWater has primarily targeted Middle Eastern nations, and has also targeted European and North American nations," Cyber Command said in a notice.</p> <p>"MuddyWater is a subordinate element within the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS)."</p> <p>On Twitter, Cyber Command said MuddyWater was using a suite of malware for espionage and malicious activity, with attribution provided by the FBI National Cyber Investigative Joint Task Force.</p> <p>"MOIS hacker group MuddyWater is using open-source code for malware," it said.</p> <p>"MuddyWater and other Iranian MOIS APTs are using DNS tunneling to communicate to its C2 infrastructure; if you see this on your network, look for suspicious outbound traffic."</p> <p>Alongside its notice, MuddyWater malware samples were uploaded to VirusTotal, including the PowGoop DDL sideloader, and Mori backdoor that uses DNS tunneling.</p> <p>"Goopdate.dll uses DLL side-loading to run when a the non-malicious executable GoogleUpdate.exe is run. goopdate.dll will then de-obfuscate goopdate.dat, which is a PowerShell script used to de-obfuscate and run config.txt," Cyber Command said as it detailed one instance of how PowGoop works.</p> <p>"Config.txt is a PowerShell script that establishes network communication with the PowGoop C2 server. It uses a modified base64 encoding mechanism to send data to and from the C2 server. The IP of the C2 server is often hardcoded in config.txt."</p> <p>In November, cyber authorities across the US, UK, and Australia attributed attacks exploiting holes in Fortinet and Exchanges to Iranian-backed attackers.</p> <p>"FBI and CISA have observed this Iranian government-sponsored APT group exploit Fortinet vulnerabilities since at least March 2021, and a Microsoft Exchange ProxyShell vulnerability since at least October 2021 to gain initial access to systems in advance of follow-on operations, which include deploying ransomware," a joint release stated.</p> <p>"ACSC is also aware this APT group has used the same Microsoft Exchange vulnerability in Australia."</p>

	<p>Rather than going after a certain sector of the economy, the authorities said the attackers were simply focused on exploiting the vulnerabilities where possible and, following operation, they then tried to turn that initial access into data exfiltration, a ransomware attack, or extortion.</p> <p>The same month, Microsoft said attacks from state-sponsored Iranian hackers on IT services firms were virtually non-existent in 2020, but in 2021 exceeded 1,500 potential attacks.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/13 Hacking groups focus on finance industry
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/fingers-point-to-lazarus-cobalt-fin7-as-key-hacking-groups-focused-on-finance-industry/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The Lazarus, Cobalt, and FIN7 hacking groups have been labeled as the most prevalent threat actors striking financial organizations today.</p> <p>According to "Follow the Money," a new report (.PDF) published on the financial sector by Outpost24's Blueliv on Thursday, members of these groups are the major culprits of theft and fraud in the industry today.</p> <p>The financial sector has always been, and possibly always will be, a key target for cybercriminal groups. Organizations in this area are often custodians of sensitive personally identifiable information (PII) belonging to customers and clients, financial accounts, and cash.</p> <p>They also often underpin the economy: if a payment processor or bank's systems go down due to malware, this can cause irreparable harm not only to the victim company in question, but this can also have severe financial and operational consequences for customers.</p> <p>PII for identity theft, bank accounts to make fraudulent purchases, a high probability a financial firm would rather submit to a ransomware blackmail demand rather than disrupt operations: these potential attack vectors mean that it is no surprise cyberattackers are relentless in their quest to compromise players in the sector.</p> <p>The COVID-19 pandemic, and the disruption to operations and training it has caused, has only made the situation worse.</p> <p>Blueliv's whitepaper, based on the unit's threat intelligence gathering, outlines the main ways in which financial entities are targeted. Phishing, Business Email Compromise (BEC) scams, malware, and credential theft all make an appearance: of which Azorult, Arkei, Redline, Raccoonstealer, and Collector are the top five credential stealers as of October 2021.</p> <p>TinyBanker/Tinba, Dridex, Anubis, Trickbot, and Kronos Trojans are commonly associated with financial service attacks, and some of these malware families may also be used to pull and execute second-stage ransomware strains including BitPaymer.</p> <p>Banks and payment processors also face other threats including point-of-sale (PoS) malware, ATM compromise, digital card skimmers physically placed at outlets that are used to clone consumer cards, and distributed denial-of-service (DoS) attacks designed to disrupt a business by flooding their online platforms with illegitimate traffic.</p> <p>When it comes to the most dangerous threat actors focused on the banking sector, Lazarus, Cobalt, and FIN7 have secured the top spots.</p> <p>Lazarus is a state-sponsored advanced persistent threat (APT) group from North Korea and has been linked to high-profile attacks against Sony Pictures Entertainment, the Bangladesh Bank via SWIFT, and the spread of WannaCry ransomware in 2017.</p>

The group has targeted the SWIFT transaction system in a number of attacks. In February last year, the US Department of Justice (DoJ) charged [two members](#) of Lazarus for their roles in attacks including those taking place against banks in Vietnam, Bangladesh, Taiwan, Mexico, and other countries.

[Cobalt](#)/Gold Kingswood has also been named. Believed to have been active since at least 2016 and appearing on the scene with an ATM jackpotting attack on a Taiwanese bank, Cobalt has been linked to attacks against financial institutions worldwide, leading to the theft of millions of dollars. Despite arrests, the group is still thought to be active.

FIN7 is another major, [financially-motivated](#) threat group. FIN7/Carbanak specializes in BEC and the deployment of Point-of-Sale (PoS) malware designed to steal vast numbers of consumer credit card records from retailers.

Other cybercriminal groups of note, according to the researchers, are Dridex and TA505.

"In order to maintain a deeper level of defense, financial institutions need to take stock of their current cybersecurity posture and prepare their organizations to adapt, making cybersecurity a core part of not just their business strategy, but also their culture," Blueliv says. "While cybersecurity strategies within the banking and finance sector are maturing, there are still many improvements that can be made."

In related news this week, [Which?](#) has conducted an investigation into the security posture of the top 15 UK banks. HSBC, NatWest, and Barclays scored the best results overall, but few managed anything close to a stellar performance in online banking services, including the use of encryption, account management, and secure login systems.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 Windows RDP bug opens users to data theft
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/windows-bug-rdp-exploit-unprivileged-users/177599/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>Remote Desktop Protocol (RDP) pipes have a security bug that could allow any standard, unprivileged Joe-Schmoe user to access other connected users' machines. If exploited, it could lead to data-privacy issues, lateral movement and privilege escalation, researchers warned.</p> <p>Insider attackers could, for instance, view and modify other people's clipboard data or impersonate other logged-in users using smart cards.</p> <p>The vulnerability, tracked as CVE-2022-21893, wasn't ballyhooed amid yesterday's crowded mega-dump of Patch Tuesday security updates, but it's more than worthy of scrutiny, according to a Tuesday report from CyberArk. The firm had discovered the bug lurking in Windows Remote Desktop Services.</p> <p>What's more, it's a widespread issue. The bug dates back at least to Windows Server 2012 R2, CyberArk software architect and security champion Gabriel Szejnworcel wrote, leading the firm to conclude that the latest versions of Windows – including client and server editions – are affected.</p> <p>"We can say that the majority of Windows versions in use today are affected," he confirmed.</p> <p>It's also easy to exploit. Microsoft said that an exploit of the vulnerability would be of low complexity, leading to a CVSS criticality rating of 7.7 out of 10, making it "important" in severity.</p> <p>Understanding RDP's Pipe Plumbing</p> <p>Szejnworcel's writeup goes into great detail about how the attack works, but some basics on RDP plumbing include the fact that RDP splits a single connection into multiple logical connections called virtual channels for handling different types of data. Some channels are responsible for the core functionality of RDP, such as graphical and input data, and other channels handle protocol extensions, such as clipboard, drive and printer redirection.</p>

“There is also an [API](#) for working with virtual channels which allows writing an application that communicates with RDP clients over custom virtual channels,” CyberArk explained, pointing to a [blog post](#) that spells out the basics of the RDP protocol.

The vulnerability involves the attack surface presented by named pipes, which are a common method for interprocess communication in Windows and which work in a client/server model.

Both sides specify the name of the pipe in the format: `\\.\pipe\name` (for the server or for a client that connects to a local named pipe); or, `\\hostname\pipe\name` (for a client that connects to a remote named pipe). Both the client and the server use the `WriteFile` and `ReadFile` functions to exchange data after the connection is established.

It’s common to have one server process that handles multiple clients by creating multiple pipe server instances, meaning that the server process will call `CreateNamedPipe` multiple times with the same pipe name, CyberArk explained.

“Each time it will get a new server instance,” according to the writeup. “When a client connects to a named pipe server, it connects to one instance. If there are multiple instances available, the client will connect to the one that was created first [FIFO, or first-in, first-out ordering].”

But because each call to `CreateNamedPipe` is independent, potentially malicious processes may create pipe server instances of the same name. “Combining this with the FIFO behavior, we can start to see how this can lead to several issues,” Szejnworcel continued.

A process can create pipe-server instances with the name of an existing pipe server, if the security descriptor of the first instance allows it, he said. And, in fact, that’s what the `TSVCPipe` security descriptor does: It “allows any user to create pipe server instances of the same name,” he said, while the data is sent over the pipes “in clear text and without any integrity checks.”

The Attack

With that background in mind, CyberArk outlined this basic attack:

- An attacker connects to a remote machine via RDP
- The attacker lists the open named pipes and finds the full name of the `TSVCPipe` pipe
- The attacker creates a pipe server instance with the same name and waits for a new connection
- Once a new connection arrives, RDS creates its own pipe server instance for the session and a pipe client that will attempt to connect to it
- Because of the FIFO, the pipe client will connect to the attacker pipe server instance instead of the one created by the RDS service
- The attacker connects as a client to the real RDS pipe server instance
- The attacker holds both ends of the connection; they can act as man-in-the-middle (MitM), passing the data back and forth, viewing and (optionally) modifying it

CyberArk pulled together those steps to create a MitM attack, demonstrated in a video in its report, that prints the data passing through the pipes. As the video shows, the researchers were able to see clipboard data that could have comprised images, files or text that might contain personal data or sensitive data such as passwords, “which is often the case in RDP sessions,” Szejnworcel said.

Accessing Other Users’ Redirected Drives, Smart Cards

But where’s the fun in printing out just raw data? CyberArk said that combing through all of the info produced by its initial exploit tool was “tedious and impractical,” so the researchers decided to target the device redirection channel (RDPDR): one of several other channels that use these pipes, each of which has its own protocol.

Of note: RDPDR itself was one of the tools used to exploit an earlier Windows RDP vulnerability, CVE-2019-0708, which is the wormable [Microsoft BlueKeep flaw](#) that left a million devices vulnerable to a [WannaCry](#)-like cyberattack in 2019.

“The RDPDR channel is used for redirecting devices such as drives and smart cards from the client machine to the remote session,” CyberArk explained. “If a user connects using a smart card (or just redirects their smart card to use it from within the session), the attacker could also take over the user’s smart card and use it as if it were connected to their machine.”

The writeup continued: “When the victim enters their smart-card PIN number, an IO control request is sent to the smart card over the channel with the PIN number in clear text, so the attacker can see it. The attacker can now connect to any resource, on the same machine or on other machines, using the victim’s smart card and PIN number, effectively impersonating the victim’s security context. In case the victim logs in with a privileged account, this leads to privilege escalation.”

RDP attacks are as old as dirt, but this new vulnerability adds a twist, showing “an example of an unconventional attack vector targeting RDP. Instead of tapping into the input side of the server/client as one usually does, we abused the RDP server internal mechanism as an entry point,” the report summed up. While CyberArk researchers chose to focus on drive and smart-card redirection, they said that they believe that the same technique would work with other types of devices, protocols and channels, such as printers, audio, USB devices and authentication redirection (via Remote Credential Guard).

They’re “strongly” recommending applying the patch Microsoft issued on Tuesday, given that “almost all Windows versions are affected.” They also suggested that developers of applications that use custom virtual channels “should check whether they are vulnerable and conduct their own security assessment.”

A New Way to Shoot the Old RDP Sitting Duck

Last July, [writing](#) for Threatpost, experts with Kroll’s Cyber Risk practice took a look at the complexities of setting up RDP for remote work, noting that the protocol itself “is not a secure setup” and therefore requires “additional security measures to keep workstations and servers protected.”

They said that without proper security protocols, “organizations face several potential risks, including the increased risk of cyberattacks.”

Matt Dunn, Kroll associate managing director, wrote that the typical targets of RDP attacks “tend to be small businesses, because they often lack the resources needed to protect against and respond to these threats.”

Cybercrooks like to target RDP vulnerabilities for a number of reasons, with the most common objectives including distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks and ransomware delivery.

As remote work has surged, cybercriminals have taken note of the increased adoption of RDP – not hard to do, given that a simple Shodan search reveals thousands of vulnerable servers reachable via the internet, along with millions of exposed RDP ports. In fact, between Q1 and Q4 2020, [attacks against RDP surged by 768 percent](#), Dunn noted, while an October 2020 [report](#) published by Kroll identified that 47 percent of ransomware attacks were preceded by RDP compromise.

Bud Broomhead, CEO at Viakoo, observed that RDP vulnerabilities “enable some of the worst cyber-criminal activities, including planting of deepfakes, data exfiltration, and spoofing of identity and credentials.”

He told Threatpost on Wednesday that while RDP is required for normal system maintenance, it can’t be left to run on its lonesome. “Additional defenses like establishing a [zero-trust](#) framework and having an automated method of quickly implementing firmware fixes are needed to ensure RDP is used safely,” he said via email.

	CyberArk's finding of the RDP vulnerability underscores "an important operating reality," according to Tim Wade, technical director for the CTO team at Vectra. Namely, as he succinctly told Threatpost on Wednesday, "sharing memory and compute with an adversary is an extremely risky business!"
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Kazakhstan chaos, crypto miners at a loss
SOURCE	https://www.wired.com/story/kazakhstan-cryptocurrency-mining-unrest-energy/#intcid=wired-verso-hp-trending_919d0052-6f66-436a-b532-cb88683b75bc_popular4-1
GIST	<p>WHEN DENIS RUSINOVICH set up cryptocurrency mining company Maveric Group in Kazakhstan in 2017, he thought he had hit the jackpot. Next door to China and Russia, the country had everything a Bitcoin miner could ask for: a cold climate, legions of old warehouses and factories where the mining rigs could be installed, and—especially—dirt cheap energy to power the electricity-guzzling process through which cryptocurrency is minted.</p> <p>"That was a good opportunity," Rusinovich says. When China outlawed cryptocurrency mining overnight last June, many miners based in the country—which at the time made up between 60 and 70 percent of Bitcoin's mining network—made the same call and hastily relocated to Kazakhstan, bringing to the country as many as 87,849 mining machines, according to a Financial Times estimate. Less than a year later, the initial buzz is history: Miners are now being confronted with frozen machines, popular unrest, and Russian troops roaming across the country. And leaving is not an option.</p> <p>Last week, chaos engulfed Kazakhstan as protests in the south of the country over a spike in fuel prices resulted in police repression, the removal of former president Nursultan Nazarbayev from his role as head of the security council, and an internet shutdown. Russian-led troops acting under the orders of the CSTO, a military alliance of post-Soviet states, were deployed to the country. The shutdown's impact on crypto mining was evident—the Bitcoin network lost 12 percent of its hashrate. Jaran Mellerud, an analyst at cryptocurrency insights company Arcane Research, estimates that the shutdown alone might have cost Kazakh miners \$7.2 million. For many miners, that was just the latest in a series of unfortunate circumstances that had dogged their operations for months. Those tempted to relocate to the country for its low energy prices had found that its aging power grid was not prepared to handle the sudden influx of miners, which caused a spike in the consumption of energy. The government said mining accounts for 8 percent of the country's capacity. Grappling with blackouts and power cuts, in October 2021 the government announced it would start rationing power supply to registered miners and unplug them if the grid came under any stress.</p> <p>This means that, at best, cryptocurrency mining farms stop working during peak hours, when the general population turns on the heating due to the inclement winter. "From 6 pm to 11 pm—[the power providers] sometimes cut off electricity to our mining farms," says Didar Bekbauov, founder of mining colocation company Xive. "That is definitely a problem. Hopefully when the winter season ends in March, we will be alright." But in other cases, Rusinovich says, it was "no operation" at all. That is not only a problem in terms of lost gains—Rusinovich says miners lost "tens of millions of dollars" a month due to the power cuts, and Bekbauov says his mines are just about breaking even—but the weather presents an additional risk during shutdowns because condensation instantly freezes on mining machines in Kazakhstan's sub-zero climate, potentially damaging the hardware. "[If the machinery is] instantly shut down, if it's cold, it freezes solid," he says. To guard that frozen stock during the protests, many miners decided to spend money on extra security, says Alan Dorjiyev, president of Kazakhstan's National Association of Blockchain and Data Centers Industry. "I talked to all the mining sector owners, and they said that they have increased the security for the mining facilities—because the equipment is quite expensive," he says. That, he says, was despite the fact that most mining farms are located in the energy-rich north of the country, far from the turmoil.</p> <p>So why are they still there? The answer is, brutally, that they are stuck. All the other major countries that have cryptocurrency mining infrastructure—including Russia, Canada, and the US—are grappling with an acute shortage of adequate facilities. "It could not be any worse—just there's no space, there's no capacity," says Alex Brammer, vice president of business development at mining company Luxor Tech.</p>

“The largest American publicly traded mining companies are having significant problems getting their miners plugged in any time within the next three to six months.”

Someone coming out of Kazakhstan who doesn't already have a groundwork of relationships built up in their target jurisdiction will find it “pretty close to impossible,” Brammer says.

Sam Doctor, head of research at digital asset brokerage and research company BitOoda, says the average waiting times to set up a new mining facility from scratch have skyrocketed to 24 months amid increasing demand and a cryptocurrency price rally. Even if that were taken care of, Kazakh miners—especially those previously based in China—will need to buy different types of energy transformers in order to be able to operate in the US, and waiting times for transformers are now around six to 12 months, Doctor says.

Even if they do manage to move, miners worry that it might not be worth it. Bekbauov says that shipping mining rigs to the US from Kazakhstan, for example, would take over two weeks, and the journey might actually end up damaging the devices. “When you're transporting used machines, they're more vulnerable to damage,” he says. Apart from the hefty shipping costs, moving the machines to the US would require a company to shell out enough money to pay for Kazakhstan's export tax of 12 percent on the machine's value, and for the 27.6 percent “Trump Tariff” on Chinese goods, given that most mining machines are made in China. Russia is a more affordable option, but Bekbauov says it suffers from the same shortage of mining infrastructure as the US. “That's why we try to remain in Kazakhstan,” he says. Rusinovich, similarly, has no plans to move his machines just yet, worried that, due to the current political tensions, traveling across and out of the country would become much more challenging. “Even going to [bordering] Russia will likely be affected: Can you imagine the customs process nowadays?” he says. “The [Kazakh] government is so worried they'll be checking every single shipment.”

Extra checks can cause even more costly delays to those determined to leave. “For the time being, it is actually wait and see,” Rusinovich says.

That is not to say that nothing will change. Mining company [Bitfufu packed up](#) in December 2021, and Dorjiyev claims that another three companies followed suit (but did not name them). Luxor's Brammer has heard from another unnamed Kazakhstan-based company looking to relocate in the wake of the past few days' events. But an exodus this is not. “We would have expected at least something similar to what happened when they announced the China ban—where our phones are just ringing off the hook. And we haven't seen that yet out of Kazakhstan,” Brammer says.

That would be quite a dramatic reversal of fortune for a country that just a couple of months ago was in the top three of global crypto mining powers. And some people, in fact, remain optimistic that this has just been a rough patch for Kazakhstan. Dorjiyev, the trade association president, says the government's plan to better regulate the country's cryptocurrency mining sector while uprooting unregistered mining operations will bring more stability and clarity to the industry—even if he fears that the ongoing crisis might distract the government from moving forward with the plan. Bekbauov says the government has promised to increase the country's energy generation capacity, and that cryptocurrency mining companies themselves might play a role in helping the country meet the required production levels. “We are looking for energy projects to invest money in,” he says. “We are looking for opportunities to build some wind power stations, or hydropower stations, and see what can be done in Kazakhstan.”

The real impact is going to be felt in the long run. Rusinovich says he has “fully reassessed” any new investment in Kazakhstan. As we speak on the phone, Bekbauov is in the US, “researching the market” for new locations. “Kazakhstan is not where the future is,” BitOoda's Doctor says. Once—if—the internal situation stabilizes and the lack of mining facilities becomes less dramatic, it is quite possible that some of Kazakhstan's miners will come unstuck and move elsewhere. But there is also a possibility that those machines will just remain there, quietly humming till the end of their life cycle, never to be replaced once they have stopped functioning. “So there may be a mining graveyard that emerges in Kazakhstan for some of the older-generation machines,” says Brammer. “You know, like Soviet bunkers full of uranium and old ASICs.”

HEADLINE	01/12 Journalists El Salvador targeted w/spyware
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/12/world/americas/el-salvador-journalists-spyware.html
GIST	<p>El Salvador's leading news outlet, El Faro, said on Wednesday that the phones of a majority of its employees had been hacked with the spyware Pegasus, which has been used by governments to monitor human rights activists, journalists and dissidents.</p> <p>The revelation came just months after the American government blacklisted the Israeli firm that produces Pegasus, the NSO Group, in an attempt to curb the largely unregulated global market in spyware.</p> <p>According to Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto's Munk School and Access Now, two cybersecurity watchdogs that analyzed the phones of El Faro's employees, the spyware had been installed on the phones of 22 reporters, editors and other employees between July 2020 and November 2021.</p> <p>During that time, El Faro was investigating the Salvadoran government's clandestine connections to the country's gangs and corruption scandals. The government has denied any connection to local gangs.</p> <p>"It's completely unacceptable to spy on journalists," said Carlos Dada, the founder and director of El Faro. "It endangers our sources, it limits our work and it also endangers our families."</p> <p>The cybersecurity watchdogs said 13 journalists from other Salvadoran news organizations were targeted as well. An El Faro journalist's phone had been reinfected with the spyware over 40 times, the most persistent hacking attempt by Pegasus yet to be discovered.</p> <p>"NSO Group's tentacles continue to spread across the globe, crushing the privacy and rights of journalists and activists into oblivion," said Angela Alarcón, who campaigns on Latin America and the Caribbean at Access Now. "Revelations that Pegasus software has been used to unjustly spy in El Salvador may not come as a complete surprise, but there is no match to our outrage."</p> <p>It remains unclear who was using NSO's surveillance technology to spy on the journalists. El Salvador's government denied responsibility, and a spokesperson with NSO Group would not say whether Pegasus spyware had been provided to El Salvador's governments, past or present.</p> <p>"The government of El Salvador is in no way related to Pegasus and is not a client of the NSO Group," Sofia Medina, the communications director for President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador, said in a statement.</p> <p>"The government of El Salvador is investigating the possible use of Pegasus," the statement added, before going on to describe a similar hacking attempt targeting Salvadoran government officials.</p> <p>The development is the latest scandal to rock NSO Group, a prized Israeli technology company whose spyware has long been under scrutiny for its ability to capture all activity on a smartphone — including a user's keystrokes, location data, sound and video recordings, photos, contacts and encrypted information — and for mounting allegations of misuse by repressive governments.</p> <p>In August it was revealed that Pegasus had been secretly installed on the smartphones of at least three dozen journalists, activists and business executives across the world, including close associates of the murdered Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. In Mexico, it was used against influential journalists and others.</p> <p>The Biden administration blacklisted NSO Group in November, stating that the company had knowingly supplied spyware used by foreign governments to "maliciously target" the phones of human rights activists, journalists and others.</p> <p>The measure was a notable break with Israel, an American ally, as the company is one of Israel's most successful technology firms and operates under direct surveillance of the Israeli government.</p>

	<p>After the American government blacklisted NSO Group, the company promised that Pegasus was only licensed to governments with good human rights records.</p> <p>But in December it was announced that the iPhones of 11 American Embassy employees working in Uganda had been hacked using Pegasus spyware.</p> <p>In an emailed statement, a spokesperson for NSO Group, who declined to provide their name, maintained the company only provides its software to legitimate intelligence agencies and to law enforcement agencies to fight criminals and terrorists.</p> <p>The spokesman added that the company does not know who the targets of its customers are, but that NSO works to ensure that its tools are used only for authorized purposes.</p> <p>Israel's Defense Ministry is in charge of regulating and approving any exports of NSO's software. The Israeli military has also been criticized for its human rights violations at home and abroad.</p> <p>While it remains unclear what entity targeted the Salvadoran journalists, El Salvador has been criticized for intimidating and censoring local media.</p> <p>El Salvador's president, Mr. Bukele, has come under withering criticism from the United States government and rights groups for using the military to interfere with the legislature and to suspend Supreme Court judges and the attorney general.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Nigeria lifts ban on Twitter after 7mo.
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/nigeria-lifts-ban-twitter-months-82228999
GIST	<p>ABUJA, Nigeria -- The Nigerian government has lifted its ban on Twitter, seven months after the West African country's more than 200 million people were shut out of the social media network.</p> <p>Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari directed that Twitter's operations can resume on Thursday, according to the director-general of the country's National Information Technology Development Agency. Kashifu Inuwa Abdullahi said that was only after Twitter agreed to meet some conditions, including opening an office in Nigeria.</p> <p>Nigeria suspended Twitter's operation on June 4, citing "the persistent use of the platform for activities that are capable of undermining Nigeria's corporate existence." The action triggered criticisms as it came shortly after the social media network deleted a post by Buhari in which he threatened to treat separatists "in the language they will understand."</p> <p>This week's action "is a deliberate attempt to recalibrate our relationship with Twitter to achieve the maximum mutual benefits for our nation without jeopardizing the justified interests of the company. Our engagement has been very respectful, cordial, and successful," Abdullahi said in a statement.</p> <p>A spokesperson for Twitter did not immediately respond to a request for comment.</p> <p>In addition to registering in Nigeria during the first quarter of 2022, Abdullahi said Twitter has also agreed to other conditions including appointing a designated country representative, complying with tax obligations and acting "with a respectful acknowledgement of Nigerian laws and the national culture and history on which such legislation has been built."</p> <p>The lifting of the ban, though a good thing, offers little hope because "whether the government likes it or not, one thing they have actually done is that they have gagged Nigerians," said Idayat Hassan, who leads the West Africa-focused Centre for Democracy and Development.</p> <p>"They have violated the right to receive and impact information," Hassan said, adding that the Nigerian government should instead prioritize "openness and effective information flow."</p>

	<p>There are no official estimates of the economic cost of Twitter’s shutdown in Africa’s most populous country since June 4 when it was announced, but NetBlocks, which estimates the cost of internet shutdowns worldwide, said Nigeria could be losing N103.1 million (\$251,000) in every hour of the blockade.</p> <p>In the course of the shutdown, many young people have been finding a way around the ban by turning to virtual private network (VPN) apps, but corporate services — some of which the Nigerian economy relies on — have remained shut out.</p> <p>Authorities have also set the ball rolling on regulating other social networks in the West African country. In August 2021, information minister Lai Mohammed told the government news agency that “we will not rest until we regulate the social media, otherwise, nobody will survive it.”</p> <p>But the government’s claim it must regulate social networks to fight fake news has been repeatedly contested by many activists. While it is true that “the weaponization of information to spread fake news in Nigeria is quite high,” an emphasis on countering fake news just online is actually defeating the purpose because it is both online and offline in Nigeria,” said CDD director Hassan.</p>
Return to Top	

Terror Conditions

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	01/13 Pakistan Taliban vow to avenge killing
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-pakistan-taliban-0331665c75339ce6cdc542c0dd6510d1
GIST	<p>PESHAWAR, Pakistan (AP) — The Pakistani Taliban on Thursday confirmed the weekend killing of a former spokesman in neighboring Afghanistan and vowed to avenge the murder.</p> <p>The outlawed Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, which is known as TTP, announced on Twitter the death of the man known as Mohammad Khurasani, which is an alias. His real name was Khalid Balti.</p> <p>The confirmation comes days after Pakistani security officials said the former spokesman of TTP had been shot dead in Afghanistan’s Nangarhar province. The TTP did not confirm the claim until Thursday.</p> <p>The current TTP spokesman, who also goes by the name Mohammad Khurasani, said on Twitter that Balti was killed on Jan. 9 while traveling. He said Balti’s death was a great loss and his death would soon be avenged.</p> <p>Balti was commander of the TTP and he served as the group’s spokesman from 2011 to 2015. That’s when he was arrested in Afghanistan and was freed after the Taliban seized power. Since then, the TTP has been emboldened.</p> <p>Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan is an umbrella group and is a separate organization from Afghanistan’s Taliban. In November, Pakistan announced a month-long cease-fire with the TTP. The group has been behind numerous attacks on security forces and civilians over the last 14 years.</p> <p>The cease-fire ended on Dec. 9 and since then the group has resumed attacks. The Taliban have assured Islamabad that they will now allow TTP to use the Afghan soil for violence in Pakistan.</p> <p>TTP’s chief Noor Wali and his fighters are believed to be hiding in Afghanistan.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 DOJ new domestic terrorism unit
----------	----------------------------------------------

SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/featured/doj-national-security-division-adding-new-domestic-terrorism-unit-as-extremist-threat-grows/
GIST	<p>The Justice Department’s National Security Division is adding a dedicated domestic terrorism unit as attacks, threats, and associated cases continue to grow, Assistant Attorney General Matthew Olsen told the Senate Judiciary Committee on Tuesday.</p> <p>“The threat posed by domestic terrorism is on the rise,” Olsen said. “The number of FBI investigations over the past two years, since March 2020, has more than doubled.”</p> <p>More than 725 individuals have been arrested and charged in connection with the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, including more than 325 defendants charged with felonies, and Olsen said DOJ will “continue to methodically gather and review the evidence, and we will follow the facts wherever they lead.”</p> <p>“The attacks in recent years underscore the threat that domestic terrorism continues to pose to our citizens, to law enforcement officers, to public officials, and to our democratic institutions,” he added. “Based on the assessment of the intelligence community, we face an elevated threat from domestic violent extremists, that is individuals in the United States who seek to commit violent criminal acts in furtherance of domestic, social, or political goals.”</p> <p>“Domestic violent extremists are often motivated by a mix of ideologies and personal grievances. We’ve seen a growing threat from those who are motivated by racial animus, as well as those who ascribe to extremist, anti-government, and anti-authority ideologies. At the same time, we remain vigilant to the persistent and dynamic threat from international terrorist groups, such as ISIS and al-Qaeda.”</p> <p>The National Security Division, which is led by Olsen, includes a team of counterterrorism attorneys who can aid with prosecuting cases with a nexus to domestic terrorism. “In addition, I have decided to establish a domestic terrorism unit to augment our existing approach,” he told senators. “This group of dedicated attorneys will focus on the domestic terrorism threat, helping to ensure that these cases are handled properly and effectively coordinated across the Department of Justice and across the country.”</p> <p>Executive Assistant Director of the FBI National Security Branch Jill Sanborn stressed that “the greatest terrorism threat facing the United States today remains that posed by lone actors or small cells who typically radicalize online and look to use easily accessible weapons to attack soft targets.”</p> <p>“When evaluating the current domestic terrorism threat, we assess that racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists advocating for the superiority of the white race and anti-government or anti-authority violent extremists, specifically militia violent extremists, present the most lethal threat,” Sanborn said. “Racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists are most likely to conduct mass casualty attacks against civilians, and militia violent extremists typically target law enforcement and government personnel and facilities. In 2021, domestic violent extremists conducted four attacks which resulted in the deaths of 13 individuals.”</p> <p>“Many domestic violent extremists also plotted to conduct attacks due to personalized grievances, including anger at government responses to COVID-19, immigration policies, and perceived election fraud,” she continued. “Looking forward, we assess domestic violent extremists’ reactions to sociopolitical events and conditions will continue to drive the threat of violence in 2022. Additionally, as we head into 2022, we assess racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists and anti-government or anti-authority violent extremists will continue to pose the most serious threats.”</p> <p>Accordingly, the FBI has prioritized the anti-government or anti-authority violent extremist threat “to be commensurate with the threat posed by homegrown violent extremism, ISIS, and racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism.”</p> <p>“The FBI holds sacred the rights of individuals to peacefully exercise their First Amendment freedoms,” Sanborn said. “But make no mistake — when protected free speech turns into criminal threats or action, the FBI will actively pursue the individuals behind them.”</p>

	<p>Asked about how disinformation and misinformation can impact recruitment and mobilization to violent domestic extremism, Olsen replied that “there’s no doubt that the misinformation, disinformation, false narratives the Intelligence Community has assessed are available online to violent extremists, again, whether that’s domestic violent extremists or those who may be influenced by international terrorist groups.”</p> <p>“And the internet and the availability of social media can be an accelerant to an individual’s movement... from simply being susceptible to those messages to being further radicalized and eventually to being mobilized to violence,” he added. “And we’ve seen this same pattern occur in both the international terrorism context when it comes to ISIS and their propaganda, as we’ve seen on the domestic violent extremist side with regard to domestic political and social influences. So, it’s a significant problem.”</p> <p>“Bottom line is violent extremist material on the internet reaches those vulnerable to recruitment, and so we’re concerned about that on the ‘misinformation,’” Sanborn said. “We know our adversaries would do whatever they could to include misinformation to sow discord.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 US-France counterterrorism cooperation
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-france-africa-counterterrorism/2022/01/11/2c6c27a2-6d65-11ec-974b-d1c6de8b26b0_story.html
GIST	<p>When five members of an Islamist militant group piled into a tan Toyota Land Cruiser and drove across a remote stretch of central Mali in mid-October — they weren’t alone.</p> <p>Above them was a MQ-9 Reaper drone equipped with technology to collect information on the passengers and cross-reference it to a terrorism database.</p> <p>The drone, operated by the U.S. military, identified one of the passengers as an explosives expert for an al-Qaeda affiliate operating on Mali’s border with Burkina Faso.</p> <p>The next day, a French military unit engaged the pickup, first trying to pull it over and then launching two airstrikes that destroyed the vehicle, killing everyone in it.</p> <p>The operation, described to The Washington Post by French military officials and confirmed by U.S. officials, is hailed by Paris as a model for U.S.-French counterterrorism cooperation at a time when Islamist groups are proliferating across Africa’s Sahel region, a vast and dry stretch of land south of the Sahara Desert.</p> <p>The Biden administration appears to agree, despite criticism from analysts that terrorist attacks and violent incidents have only increased since France began its military campaign in the region eight years ago.</p> <p>Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin informed his French counterpart in the fall that the United States would continue to provide intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support to the French mission using Washington’s advanced drone and satellite technology. The United States also said it would assist France with air refueling, medical evacuations and other logistical support.</p> <p>The Biden administration’s decision followed one of the most rancorous public spats in U.S.-French relations in recent memory. In September, Paris recalled its ambassador from Washington for the first time in history after the United States secretly negotiated a deal to provide nuclear-powered submarines to Australia. The U.S. agreement effectively sank a French contract worth billions to sell diesel-powered submarines to Australia. France’s foreign minister called the maneuver a “stab in the back.”</p> <p>Scrambling to end the dispute, the White House turned to U.S. intelligence support in the Sahel, then under review by the Pentagon and National Security Council, and decided to reinforce the effort rather than scale it back.</p>

“France has an historic presence in the region,” Cynthia King, a Pentagon spokeswoman, said in a statement last week. “The U.S. supports French efforts in the region as our interests addressing significant terrorist threats align.”

The episode demonstrates the Biden administration’s sensitivity to accusations of mishandling relations with a key ally — an attack President Biden frequently leveled at his predecessor Donald Trump, especially regarding NATO. It also underscores how a diplomatic row in one part of the world can influence U.S. policy in another.

“Because we screwed the pooch on the submarine deal, we were looking for a way into France’s good graces,” said Cameron Hudson, an Africa scholar at the Atlantic Council.

“Biden’s decision to recommit short-circuited an interagency process to fundamentally rethink U.S. involvement in the Sahel,” he added. “They were reviewing whether to move away from a securitized strategy to a more development- and government-based strategy.”

A senior U.S. official acknowledged that Washington wants to see reforms in Paris’s approach to the Sahel mission. But the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive policy matters, said the White House based its decision on the shared goal of violence-reduction and a promise from the French to put a greater focus on governance and development issues.

A debate over how the United States should support France’s efforts in Africa has been going on since Paris launched its military intervention in the Sahel in 2013 at the request of the Malian government. At the time, France sent troops to oust Islamist militants from towns they had seized across northern Mali. The French mission eventually morphed into Operation Barkhane, a 5,000-strong deployment of French troops to Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and other neighboring countries where the militants posed a threat.

Despite the French intervention, radical groups continued to mount attacks against government forces across the region as well as carry out deadly assaults on civilians.

By the time Biden came into office, the outlook in the Sahel looked bleak. Hundreds were dying in a spate of massacres along the border of Niger and Mali.

French public support for the mission, which was widely popular at first, was beginning to slip. And in the summer, French President Emmanuel Macron announced a decision to [withdraw more than 2,000 troops](#) by early 2022 and reorient the French presence toward military training and bolstering the democratic institutions of partner countries.

“France doesn’t have the vocation or the will to stay eternally in the Sahel,” said Macron. “We are there because we’re asked to be.”

Supporters of the U.S.-French collaboration acknowledge past setbacks but say the collaboration harnesses France’s knowledge of its former colonies and doesn’t require the United States to send ground troops.

“Cutting off the French is not in the U.S. interest,” said Michael Shurkin, a former CIA analyst and director at 14 North Strategies, a research firm. “France’s strategy in the Sahel is failing because of the disinterest and inability of Malian leaders to do all they need to do. We can fret but have no better ideas than the French, and, frankly, we have very little leverage with local leaders.”

Critics of the French approach say the emphasis on tracking and killing terrorists is radicalizing the local population, creating more militants and more supporters of violent Islamist groups.

“The intervention is objectively a failure,” said Alioune Tine, an independent human rights expert for the United Nations and founder of [the AfrikaJom Center think tank](#). “Far from defeating or weakening the terrorist attacks or wiping them out, we have unfortunately witnessed their reinforcement and their

extension. Today, the threat extends to coastal countries, to Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Togo, Ghana and even Senegal."

Although governments in the Sahel sought France's military help, some Africans see the French presence as a vestige of French colonial rule and believe international assistance would be better directed at improving government services and investing in schools and hospitals.

"The failure of the armed intervention in the Sahel has had perverse effects on Malian and African opinion, which is hostile to France, and has fostered anti-French sentiment among young people," Tine said.

What is not in dispute is the value France places on its support from the United States.

Brig. Gen. Cyril Carcy, the defense attache at the French Embassy in Washington, said the assistance the United States provides to France is "paramount."

He pointed to France's killing of Islamist militants in the Toyota Land Cruiser in mid-October. The key target in the strike was Nasser al-Tergui, a senior member of Katiba Serma, an al-Qaeda affiliate responsible for numerous attacks on government troops, civilians and U.N. workers in the Sahel. Before the strike, French forces provided U.S. counterparts with intelligence on Tergui's pattern of life and area of operation.

Using that information, U.S. drones were able to locate Tergui, and officials were then able to "cross-check" the images and phone data they collected, Carcy said. French officials subsequently confirmed the identity of Tergui and his fellow passengers in the pickup using human sources.

U.S. military personnel then provided targeting guidance to the French in their air assault on the vehicle. "When we have the U.S. drone, it is definitely much easier," Carcy said.

[Return to Top](#)

Suspicious, Unusual

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 Covid testing sites under probe; fake tests?
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/center-for-covid-control-covid-19-testing-sites-under-investigation-after-flood-of-complaints
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - The Washington Attorney General and Better Business Bureau are investigating a COVID-19 testing company that is being inundated with negative reviews and complaints. The Center for Covid Control operates sites nationwide, including in Washington and Oregon.</p> <p>Some of the complaints on the BBB's website accuse the company of scamming customers. Many of them say they've not received test results.</p> <p>In Seattle's International District, the words "FAKE TESTS" were spray-painted on the outside of a pop-up "Center for Covid Control" testing site.</p> <p>It's just one of nearly a dozen testing sites in Washington state and 300 in the country operated by the Illinois-based company.</p> <p>The company is apparently not affiliated with King County Department of Health of the Washington State Department of Health.</p> <p>Now, there are allegations of fake tests across the country including people who say they received their test results before they were even tested.</p>

The Washington State Attorney General's Office told FOX 13 News that it has received two consumer complaints about the test sites.

The BBB has also received two from the [Seattle area](#), saying in a statement: "The BBB is actively monitoring the reports of COVID-19 testing sites that have recently opened in the U.S. under different names."

At another site in Seattle's [Queen Anne](#) neighborhood, FOX 13 tried to set up a test. The system asks for a variety of personal information including photos of your driver's license or ID card and your insurance information. A screen during the signup process also requires you to waive your rights regarding protecting your health information under HIPAA laws.

FOX 13 News has twice reached out to the Center for Covid Control for a response, but we have not heard back.

Complaints across America

In Oregon, one family raised a red flag about a testing site in the Portland area. They told [KOIN-TV](#) that the whole experience "seemed a bit sketchy." They said they were told to put their PCR tests into a bin that resembled a garbage bin. Their tests came back negative except for one that never returned a result. To be safe, they were tested again and found out that they were positive.

Another family in Florida told [WINK-TV](#) that they received their test results will still waiting in line to be tested.

KOIN also reports that the Department of Justice has opened a civil investigation into the company.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of the Inspector General said there has been an [increase in COVID-19 fraud complaints](#) including many related to testing.

"We are seeing fraudulent activity around testing. It could be random pop-up sites, and it could be at-home test kits," Yvonne Gamble, the office's acting director of communications, told USA Today. "Be vigilant. Be careful. Be mindful, and make sure whoever you are dealing with is an authorized provider and a place that you can trust."

The FBI has also warned of emerging schemes:

"Beware of individuals who contact you in person, by phone, or by email to tell you the government or government officials require you to take a COVID-19 test. These scammers will likely ask for your health insurance information, including your Medicare or Medicaid number, and other personal information. Prior health care fraud investigations have shown that once scammers obtain an individual's personal information, they use it to bill federal health care programs and/or private health insurance plans for tests and procedures the individual did not receive and pocket the proceeds. Be cautious of any unsolicited offers that require or request your medical insurance information."

"Also beware of individuals offering to sell you a COVID-19 test kit or supplies, especially when these contacts are unexpected. A physician or other trusted health care provider should assess your condition and approve any requests for COVID-19 testing. Some scammers are selling fake at-home test kits; some are even going door-to-door and performing fake tests for money. Legitimate tests are offered free to patients when administered by a health care professional."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/13 Virus tracing app to scout crime witnesses
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/german-police-used-a-tracing-app-to-scout-crime-witnesses-some-fear-that-e2-80-99s-fuel-for-covid-conspiracists/ar-AASJr1z

GIST

Authorities in Germany are under fire for tracking down witnesses to a potential crime by using data from a mobile phone app that was intended to help identify close contacts of people infected with the coronavirus.

Police in the city of Mainz, near Frankfurt, successfully petitioned local health authorities to release data from an app called Luca when a man fell to his death after leaving a restaurant in November. They said they were seeking witnesses who had dined at the restaurant around the same time and [reportedly found](#) 21 people from the app data.

The apparent misuse of the data has been criticized by privacy advocates, who fear that such sensitive information will be used for non-pandemic-control purposes. The incident is also likely to provide fodder for vaccine doubters, some of whom have taken on a broader anti-government stance, and those who believe coronavirus-related [conspiracy theories](#).

Luca is subject to Germany's strict data-protection regulations and, by law, information from the app cannot be accessed by non-health authorities and used in criminal prosecutions. The app stores the user's personal details and uses QR codes to record how long they've spent at a location. The information is encrypted to obscure any personal information, according to Culture4life, the company that developed the app, and can only be decrypted by health authorities if someone at a venue is infected.

Culture4life said it received requests from law enforcement for data from Luca "almost every day" and that it always declined because it did not have the ability to access tracing information. "In this case, the health department probably simulated an infection under pressure or requests from the police and obtained the consent of the company [the restaurant] to provide the data," the organization said.

Mainz police did not immediately return a request for comment.

There has been public resistance in Europe against the use of such apps, especially in Germany and Austria, where memories of authoritarian-government excesses from the past century linger. Experts say the uptake of tracing apps has been slow in [virtually all countries](#) where such apps have been promoted, including in the United States, partly because of privacy concerns.

Several lawmakers condemned the latest incident, warning it could undermine efforts to track infections. "We must not allow faith in digital apps, which are an important tool in the fight against covid-19, to disappear," Konstantin von Notz, a lawmaker for the German Greens, told the Handelsblatt newspaper.

In places such as South Korea, Israel and China, digital surveillance has been used aggressively during the pandemic to follow citizens' movements and identify those who may have been exposed to the virus. European governments, on the other hand, have sought to be global standard-bearers in their commitment to privacy protections.

The Germany case isn't the first time authorities have used data obtained from coronavirus tracing apps in criminal investigations.

Officials in Singapore — where privacy laws are much less strict — last year conceded they had used data from the country's TraceTogether app in a homicide investigation. While the use of apps such as Luca is generally voluntary in Europe, TraceTogether is required in Singapore to gain access to many restaurants and office buildings.

Facing a backlash, Singaporean authorities updated the privacy statement on the app, and later amended legislation to make it clear that the data could be used in a serious criminal investigation. The Southeast Asian state's government has promised to stop use of the app once the pandemic ebbs.

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-diplomats-in-geneva-paris-struck-with-suspected-havana-syndrome-11642075202?cx_testId=3&cx_testVariant=cx_2&cx_artPos=0&mod=WTRN#cxrecs_s
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON—Officials serving at U.S. diplomatic missions in Geneva and Paris are suspected to have been afflicted with the mysterious neurological ailment known as Havana Syndrome and at least one was evacuated back to the U.S. for treatment, people familiar with the incidents said.</p> <p>Suspected attacks on U.S. officials serving in the two European cities were reported internally last summer to officials at those posts and eventually to the State Department in Washington. The diplomats joined as many as 200 others who came down with suspected Havana Syndrome while stationed in China, South America, and elsewhere in Europe.</p> <p>At least three Americans serving at the consulate in Geneva, a city that hosts nearly a dozen major multilateral organizations, were suspected to have been afflicted by the syndrome, which the Biden administration has dubbed an “anomalous health incident.” At least one of those officials was medevaced from Switzerland to the U.S. for treatment. The mission’s leadership later informed staff about the incidents during a town hall meeting. In Paris, senior embassy officials informed diplomats via email about a suspected case, the officials said, and encouraged others to report any unusual symptoms.</p> <p>The State Department didn’t respond to a request for comment, and typically doesn’t comment on reported incidents, citing privacy.</p> <p>In November, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the administration was “intently focused” on getting to the bottom of these incidents which, he said, had inflicted profound physical and physiological harm since they were first reported by diplomats serving at the U.S. Embassy in Havana more than five years ago.</p> <p>Symptoms include headaches, dizziness, cognitive difficulties, tinnitus, vertigo and trouble with vision, hearing and balance. Many officials have suffered symptoms years after reporting an incident, while some have been diagnosed with traumatic brain injuries.</p> <p>The Geneva and Paris cases are the latest in Europe, where cases have also been reported in Austria, Serbia and Germany. The Wall Street Journal also reported nearly half a dozen recent cases at the massive American Embassy complex in Bogotá, Colombia. Consulates in China have also had suspected cases.</p> <p>Officials caution that a precise count of victims is difficult to determine because each case must be medically verified and some individuals’ symptoms end up having other explanations.</p> <p>In the years since the first symptoms emerged, the U.S. government has yet to determine who is behind the attacks and what mechanism or mechanisms are being used.</p> <p>Jonathan Moore, a career diplomat, was named the new head of the State Department’s Health Incident Response task force in November. Margaret Uyehara, a career foreign service officer with three decades of experience, now serves as a senior care coordinator for those affected by the mysterious incidents.</p> <p>In early October, President Biden signed the bipartisan HAVANA Act—or Helping American Victims Afflicted by Neurological Attacks Act—into law, which commits the U.S. government to boosting medical support for officials who have been affected.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	01/12 Critical blood shortage less than day supply
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/facing-blood-shortage-bloodworks-northwest-has-less-than-a-days-supply/
GIST	The critical blood shortage that started with the pandemic shows no signs of letting up, according to Bloodworks Northwest. The local nonprofit said the shortage has left it in dire straits.

	<p>Bloodworks said it has less than a full day's supply for the Northwest, with most blood types at emergency levels. Hospitals are canceling elective surgeries because of the shortage, said spokesperson John Yeager.</p> <p>The weather, an increase in COVID-19 cases and staff shortages that closed some donation centers all contributed to the crisis, he said.</p> <p>Bloodworks is reminding people who wish to donate that they can if they are symptom-free and feeling healthy.</p> <p>If you just got vaccinated against the coronavirus, there is no wait before donating, Bloodworks said. But if you've had COVID symptoms or tested positive in the past two weeks, you'll need to wait to donate.</p> <p>"Our community needs you to donate blood in January," Yeager said in an email.</p> <p>Bloodworks Northwest's COVID-19 safety protocols include social distancing, sanitizing and masks, he said. Bloodworks requires staff to be fully vaccinated. There are nearly 1,300 open blood-donation appointments this week, he said.</p> <p>To find out more about how to donate and where, visit bloodworksnw.org/donate.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	01/12 Cannabis can prevent Covid infection?
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/y3v3ax/scientists-cannabis-can-prevent-covid-19-infection
GIST	<p>That one friend who insists weed has health benefits for everything under the sun could actually be on to something when it comes to one very important disease: COVID-19.</p> <p>A new study has identified cannabis compounds as a therapeutic agent to prevent coronavirus infections by blocking the virus from entering human cells. According to the study's authors, widespread use of these compounds from pot plants and a vaccination regime could help to fight the virus's spread and the disease it causes in people who get infected.</p> <p>"With widespread use of cannabinoids, resistant variants could still arise, but the combination of vaccination and CBDA/CBGA treatment should create a more challenging environment with which SARS-CoV-2 must contend, reducing the likelihood of escape," the study's authors write.</p> <p>As detailed in a new study published in the peer-reviewed Journal of Natural Products by researchers from Oregon State University and Oregon Health & Sciences University, the scientists were looking for a biological compound that could bind with the spike protein of the SARS-COV-2 virus, which causes COVID-19. Using a technique called affinity-selection mass spectrometry (used to quickly assess a large volume of compounds) on cannabis, the researchers honed in on three compounds: cannabigerolic acid, or CBG-A; tetrahydrocannabinolic acid, or THC-A; and cannabidiolic acid, or CBD-A. Sadly, since THC-A is a controlled substance, they couldn't get enough of the stuff to assess its effects and focused on the others.</p> <p>So, what does that mean? Most of us are familiar with THC, which gets you stoned, and also CBD, which does not get you stoned but which you can buy in a can of infused soda and appears to have other health benefits. What you might not know is that those glorious substances come from precursors, which are acids. CBG-A is only found during the live, growing phase of the cannabis plant, and converts into everything else we love about it. CBD-A turns into CBD through "decarboxylation," which can be the application of heat through smoking, vaping, or baking.</p> <p>What that means is that you can't really get CBG-A and CBD-A via any process of ingesting cannabis that gets you high. Rather, you'd have to extract it from a hemp plant that probably wouldn't have made it to the bowl of your resin-stained bong to begin with.</p>

	<p>The team incubated the live virus with cannabis compounds as well as a control and, after 24 hours, injected them into human epithelial cells; they found that cells that had been treated with CBD-A and CBG-A lacked SARS-COV-2 RNA. They performed the same procedure on live alpha and beta variants, first detected in the UK and South Africa, respectively, and found that the compounds had the same effect in both cases. They express optimism that these compounds can be effective against other variants, too.</p> <p>“Our data show minimal impact of the variant lineages on the effectiveness of CBDA and CBGA, a trend that will hopefully extends to other existing and future variants,” the authors write.</p> <p>Their findings point to the cannabis compounds as “virus neutralizing,” capable of blocking the entry of coronavirus in high concentrations that the researchers note are “high but might be clinically achievable.” They recommend oral administration of the compounds—meaning adequate use of cannabis for COVID-19 prevention would likely come in the form of a pill or liquid.</p> <p>“These compounds can be taken orally and have a long history of safe use in humans,” said Richard Van Breemen, first author on the study and Professor of Medicinal Chemistry at the Linus Pauling Institute at Oregon State University in a press release.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Severe South America heat wave
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2022/01/12/buenos-aires-hits-106-degrees-amid-severe-south-american-heat-wave/
GIST	<p>A multi-day heat wave is gripping parts of central South America, bringing record warmth to several large cities. Parts of Argentina are about 25 degrees above normal, while Chile, Paraguay and Bolivia are experiencing unusual warmth. Excess strain on power grids has caused widespread outages, leaving 700,000 people in the Argentine capital without electricity. The heat wave doesn’t appear to be letting up until this weekend.</p> <p>The heat has been unusually pronounced for more than two weeks in Argentina, where temperatures topped 100 degrees to round out December. Areas south of the equator are experiencing summer at present, but readings are still wildly off base for what would typically be observed this time of year.</p> <p>Buenos Aires Ezeiza Airport hit 104.2 degrees on Dec. 29, its highest December temperature on record and, at the time, highest overall temperature since 1999. The city’s observatory spiked to 41.1 degrees Celsius, or 106 degrees Fahrenheit, on Tuesday. Only one day — in January 1957 — had snagged a higher temperature in nearly 115 years of record-keeping.</p> <p>Maximiliano Herrera, a climate historian who tracks international temperature records, described Tuesday as “a historic day in Buenos Aires.” The recent heat wave also represents the first time since 1995 that the Argentine capital has seen temperatures exceeding 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit), meaning nobody there under the age of 26 has experienced temperatures this high before.</p> <p>Records toppled</p> <p>Argentina’s National Meteorological Service noted that 11 records had been smashed Tuesday. Five major cities — Punta Indio, Buenos Aires, Las Flores, El Palomar and San Fernando — registered both their highest January temperatures on record and their highest readings in at least 50 years.</p> <p>The agency issued red alerts for much of the country, writing that the “extreme temperatures” would have “very dangerous” health effects.</p> <p>Córdoba, a city of 3.3 million in the strip of flat plains that stretches through central Argentina, climbed to 108.5 degrees Monday.</p> <p>Farther to the west in San Juan, a city in the lee of the Andes Mountains east of the border with Chile, temperatures unofficially may have reached 111 degrees.</p>

San Antonio Oeste, 500 miles southwest of Buenos Aires and on the water, made it to 109 degrees, the station's second-highest reading on record. Westerly winds helped blow extremely warm air all the way toward the coast, fending off the more moderate marine layer.

Tres Arroyos, east of Bahía Blanca, set a record at 105.3 degrees, and nearby Coronel Pringles, about 45 miles to the west-northwest, also managed a record at 103.3 degrees.

“Wear light clothing and light colors,” the weather service tweeted. “Eat lightly. Don’t expose yourself to the sun.”

It was also exceptionally hot in neighboring [Paraguay and Uruguay](#), where temperatures soared above 104 degrees (40 Celsius).

Downright dangerous

Unlike in many North American heat waves, relative humidities across central Argentina were very low. That meant the air where the hottest conditions were ongoing was bone dry.

In scorching environments characterized by dry conditions, people outdoors won’t actively notice sweat accumulating on their bodies — instead, the atmosphere will evaporate it before it can collect, desiccating an individual before they even notice they’re dry. That makes the heat especially dangerous.

The extreme temperatures are the result of a heat dome, or a sprawling ridge of high pressure, that brings hot temperatures and sinking air. Parcels of air that sink are subject to a process called adiabatic compression, which squeezes air pockets and causes them to heat up even more. Air that “downslopes,” or slides down the Andes, experiences the same phenomenon, magnifying the effect.

Since air expands when it’s heated, heat domes can cause the lower atmosphere to bulge and expand vertically. The heat dome over Argentina thus far has boosted the atmosphere’s “halfway” mark of density about 415 feet higher than average.

The heat wave could eventually affect agriculture, too; Argentina is among the world’s top exporters of soybean and corn.

A climate connection

Heat waves are among the deadliest weather phenomena, surpassing tornadoes, flooding and hurricanes in their human toll in many areas. Quantifying their exact human impact is difficult because of the issue of “excess mortality,” which occurs when the elderly, those with preexisting health conditions and other vulnerable populations die prematurely because of the heat.

Overnight minimum temperatures, which in some places may not drop below 75 or 80 degrees, can prevent the body from having an opportunity to cool down and reset before the next day of heat.

Human-induced climate change is amplifying the frequency and intensity of heat domes and, subsequently, bolstering the impacts of extreme heat. Last year was the fifth-hottest on record globally, according to the [Copernicus Climate Change Service](#) of the European Union, and [ocean warmth hit a record](#) because of the uptake of greenhouse gases spewed by human activity.

While the heat in Argentina looks likely to subside by this weekend, it’s the latest episode to fit into an alarming pattern illustrating the effects of human-induced climate change.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 Winter fastest-warming season in most US
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/12/warmer-winters-climate-crisis-us
GIST	American winters are rapidly warming and December 2021 was no exception.

In New York, last month's average temperature was 43.8F (6.5C) – 4.7F above the 1991-to-2020 average according to a recent [analysis](#) by Climate Central. The American south had an especially warm December, with Shreveport, Louisiana (+13.4F), Dallas, Texas (+13.2F), and Memphis, Tennessee (+12.4F), all posting unusually high temperatures.

“Many places were just extraordinarily warm for this time of year,” said Andrew Pershing, director of climate science at non-profit Climate Central where he and his team document changing weather patterns and release their analysis each month. “Winter is the season when we don't think about heat the way we do in July or August – this is a sign that we live on a planet that's changing.”

Although we can't draw conclusions from one month of data, experts say it is part of a broader trend in which winters are progressively getting hotter. 2021 was the [fourth hottest year](#) for the US on record and winter is the [fastest-warming season](#) in 38 out of 49 American states, excluding Hawaii, since 1970.

“These are the conditions that we expect to see more and more of,” Pershing said. While some might find milder winters enjoyable and more manageable, cold temperatures are crucial for biodiversity, water supply and farm yield.

Warming winter months affect the migration of animals, like disease-carrying ticks that are increasingly found in [areas](#) that were once too cold for them to survive in.

Advertisement

“They're emerging earlier in the spring, and they're staying active later in the fall,” said Theresa Crimmins, the director of the USA National Phenology Network. She is a research professor at the University of Arizona focusing on the relationship between climate and biological life cycles. “That's a longer period of time that they could potentially be interacting with humans and potentially biting and spreading diseases.”

Shifts in weather patterns also mean that the pollen allergy season is starting [20 days earlier](#) and lasting more than a week longer in North America, compared with the allergy season in 1990. Rising temperatures are disrupting the freshwater supply in much of the western US, with states such as Nevada, Utah and Wyoming experiencing [15-30%](#) decreases of snow-derived freshwater.

“There are a lot of plants that require cold conditions for the fruits to mature,” Pershing said. Apples, peaches, cherries and blueberries are among the many farm crops that need winter chilling hours in order to develop for the spring and summer harvest. With the increased winter temperatures, the chance for these fruits to be adequately cooled is causing [premature bloom](#) and quicker ageing.

“Warmer winters and springs are generally resulting in earlier springtime activity [in some plants],” said Crimmins, noting that fruit trees are all at risk of “false spring” – a phenomenon which triggers early flowering.

Although most of the US has seen increased temperatures last month, some cities, such as Los Angeles, Seattle and San Francisco, have seen colder than normal December temperatures.

“Even with climate change, we would expect in a typical month some places in the US to be cooler than normal,” Pershing said. “But this December what really stood out was this [region] right along the Pacific coast with locations that were below normal.”

That is probably attributable to [La Niña](#), a climate pattern condition that [occurs](#) in the Pacific Ocean every two to seven years. This anomaly leads to cooler weather and increased snow and rain in the north-west and generally warmer, drier conditions in the south-east.

But despite this cool kick, the nation overall is experiencing an unusually warm winter.

	“It’s actually quite remarkable – in general when you have a La Niña condition it’s like you’ve turned the air conditioner on,” Pershing said. “So the fact that we’re in the ballpark of the record warming year suggests that global warming is starting to really overpower some of these natural climate cycles.”
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Army: series of soldier deaths in Alaska
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/12/army-investigates-series-soldier-deaths-alaska/
GIST	<p>A soldier found dead in his off-post home near Fairbanks, Alaska is the fifth soldier to die in the state in less than two months.</p> <p>The cause of death of Master Sgt. Wesley Woods, 40, remains under investigation by the Army’s Criminal Investigation Division and the Alaska Department of Public Safety.</p> <p>Paramedics spent more than 30 minutes trying to revive Master Sgt. Woods on Dec. 30, 2021 but he was pronounced dead at the scene, authorities said.</p> <p>His death was the latest in a string of Alaska-based soldiers in recent weeks. Spec. Hunter Trey Stafford, 21, died Dec. 8 at his off-post residence in Fairbanks. Meanwhile, Sgt. Miles Tarron, 30 was discovered dead in his car in Anchorage on Nov. 28. On Nov. 26, Spec. Isaiah O’Neal was found dead in his vehicle in Fairbanks, while the body of Sgt. Christian D’Andrea, 22, was found at his off-post home in Fairbanks on Nov 12, according to the Anchorage Daily News.</p> <p>As the twin investigations into the death of Master Sgt. Woods continue, the Army’s senior non-commissioned officer took to social media to ask, “When did suicide become the answer?”</p> <p>“I care so much for you guys, my Arctic Warriors,” Command Sgt. Major Phil Blaisdell wrote on Instagram. “Please send me a DM if you need something.”</p>
Return to Top	

Crime, Criminals

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 KCSO: 2 arrests after crime spree
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/issaquah-police-two-arrested-for-carjacking-woman-ramming-police-car
GIST	<p>Police said two men were in custody Wednesday following a wild crime spree that included a police pursuit in a reported stolen vehicle, a carjacking and the ramming of a law enforcement vehicle, most of which was all caught on camera.</p> <p>Police say officers attempted to stop the stolen vehicle but the suspects drove off and led police to Bellevue.</p> <p>The King County Sheriff’s Office released video from their helicopter which showed the two suspects bailing from the vehicle on foot in a strip shopping center in Bellevue.</p> <p>The footage showed the suspects trying unsuccessfully to carjack other motorists before one of the suspects managed to get a woman out of a red SUV just as law enforcement officers were arrive at the scene.</p> <p>The lone suspect sped off, leaving a second suspect behind. That person was taken into custody as a law enforcement helicopter tracked the other suspect as they drove through King County.</p> <p>That suspect stopped the red SUV and walked into an open garage as another driver was entering it but fled from that house and returned to the SUV as officers arrived.</p>

	<p>The suspect ended up on a dead-end road that was flooded and drove the SUV into the water before abandoning it into a river near Fall City and Dike roads.</p> <p>The suspects, the woman and an officer were taken to a local hospital for treatment of minor injuries. Information about their condition was pending</p> <p>The identities of the suspects and the charges they could face were pending.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Europe prisons push back against Covid
SOURCE	https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2022-01-12/european-prisons-face-data-scarcity-omission-in-fight-against-covid-19
GIST	<p>As European countries hunker down to battle yet another wave of COVID-19, its prisons wage a war within a war, largely overlooked and undercounted in COVID-19 action plans across the continent.</p> <p>“In some cases, it was that prisons were not mentioned at all in the national vaccination plan,” says Triona Lenihan, a policy and international advocacy manager at Penal Reform International. “A lot of the COVID policies generally in the (overall) community and prisons have been reactionary.”</p> <p>While vaccines rolled in for the civil population in January of last year, many prisons did not begin receiving them until that summer. As policymakers and nongovernmental organizations try to bridge the vaccination gap, they battle blind, restricted by limited data on prison populations and a lack of transparency.</p> <p>As of September 2021, only eight countries in Europe had vaccinated more than 80% of their prison populations, according to figures from Penal Reform International’s year-end global scan of COVID-19 vaccination.</p> <p>The report draws on surveys in 177 countries around the world and fully confirmed data on progress.</p> <p>Of those countries, official government or similar national vaccination plans were found in 131 countries according to the study. And from that number, only 56 countries explicitly mention vaccination strategies for prisoners. By now, most countries in Central and Western Europe have begun vaccinating those in detainment, though progress remains unclear.</p> <p>However, vaccine access in some places has hinged on what Lenihan describes a “luck of the draw,” based on detained people’s residence in a geographical region or prison with higher standards of care, as many European countries operate their prisons at the regional level.</p> <p>Many countries have expanded their efforts beyond vaccination to push back against the tide of emerging variants, such as via early release programs.</p> <p>While prison populations have seen large declines in Russia and other countries in Eastern Europe, the rest of Europe has increased by 5% since the year 2000. Efforts to reduce Europe’s prison populations in at least 27 countries during the early days of the pandemic. However, measures tapered off as with the progressive waves of the virus.</p> <p>“The problem was that, as the situation improved a little, those measures reverted back,” explains Dr. Filipa Alves da Costa, who is a public health consultant in the Alcohol, Illicit Drugs & Prison Health Programme at the World Health Organization. “Most laws that were implemented were temporary ... They weren’t just taking people out of prisons because they thought they shouldn’t be there, but because there was a health threat.”</p> <p>According to reports by the European Data Journalism Network, countries such as Sweden and Romania have even increased their prison populations since the beginning of the pandemic.</p>

	<p>Paired with health care worker shortages, an already medically underserved population has been pushed to the brink.</p> <p>Outside providers account for a sizable number of health care workers within prisons. Due to their in hospitals or other high risk areas, many were restricted from entering prisons throughout the pandemic. “The same applies to (others who aren’t necessarily health workers but) provide health services. For example ... the needle and syringe exchange program or psychological support,” Alves da Costa says.</p> <p>The question of psychological care weighs heavily on the minds of prison activists and advocates. Though many countries have introduced or increased use of video communication, Teledoc, and other virtual services, the cessation of prison leave, recreational activities, and visitation has exacerbated mental health troubles within detained populations.</p> <p>“There was a pre-existing mental health crisis in prisons globally before the pandemic. So, any impact from the pandemic is exposing and compounding all of those existing issues,” says Lenihan of Policy Reform International. “The pandemic did inspire this massive expansion in digital online tools for that purpose and for contact with the outside world, which has a huge impact on the mental health of people in detention.”</p> <p>Despite this increased attention to prison vaccinations and leaps in technology therein, many prison populations’ COVID-19 vaccination rates remain well below the WHO’s global target of 70% to effectively combat omicron. For many, the hope is that the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to shine a light on inequalities faced by detained people.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 King Co. criminal trials suspended 4 weeks
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/suspension-of-new-criminal-trials-in-king-county-superior-court-extended-4-weeks-due-to-omicron/
GIST	<p>With the omicron variant of the coronavirus still raging in King County, Superior Court Presiding Judge Patrick Oishi on Wednesday issued an emergency order to extend a suspension of the start of new criminal trials for another four weeks in an effort to protect jurors, witnesses, staff and other court visitors from becoming infected.</p> <p>Oishi took over as presiding judge on Jan. 1 and will serve in that position for one year. His predecessor, Judge Jim Rogers, issued an emergency order on Dec. 28 suspending the start of new criminal trials through Friday.</p> <p>Without Oishi’s emergency order, new criminal trials could have begun being scheduled on Tuesday, after the Martin Luther King Jr. Day holiday Monday. His order covers the period from Tuesday through end of business Feb. 11.</p> <p>Oishi’s emergency order says most civil trials shall be conducted remotely, but some in-person, civil court proceedings can be held with prior court approval, especially those cases currently underway. Oishi’s order also allows for in-person, juvenile criminal bench trials to be conducted at the discretion of the juvenile court’s chief judge.</p> <p>All trials currently underway shall be allowed to continue through completion, the order says. The court’s daily calendar shows that there is currently one murder trial and a handful of civil trials currently in progress.</p> <p>At the time of Rogers’ Dec. 28 emergency order, Public Health – Seattle & King County reported a 195% increase in coronavirus cases and a 58% increase in hospitalizations across the county.</p> <p>Oishi’s order, also citing information from public health officials, reports a 109% increase in coronavirus cases and a 102% increase in hospitalizations in the county over the past seven days.</p>

Both the vaccinated and unvaccinated must be allowed access to the court, which has the responsibility “to keep all people who enter the courthouse safe,” says the order. Everyone who goes to the courthouse is required to wear a mask.

Like Rogers’ earlier order, Oishi’s emergency order notes that King County Superior Court adopted widespread use of video and telephonic technologies, resulting in completion of more than 1,000 remote bench trials and more than 300 jury trials since the start of the pandemic. That number includes 190 criminal trials — which must be held in person for security reasons and to maintain chain-of-custody of items of evidence — and 110 civil trials, with 70 of them conducted remotely.

Voir dire, the process where attorneys question prospective jurors before seating a jury, has been conducted virtually for all trials, allowing for trials to proceed smoothly, the order says.

Since the start of the pandemic, criminal trials will have been put on hold for a combined 10½ months by the time Oishi’s emergency order expires in mid-February. The pandemic-driven court slowdown has led to [a backlog of approximately 6,000 adult felony cases](#), double the number typically awaiting resolution, with more than 250 murder cases yet to go to trial, King County Prosecutor Dan Satterberg said last week.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 WA wildlife manager accused of poaching
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/washington-state-wildlife-manager-accused-of-poaching/
GIST	<p>A Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife employee has been accused of poaching.</p> <p>The Ferry County prosecutor accused Brock Hoenes, the director for WDFW’s north-central region, with unlawful hunting of big game in the second degree. The document was filed in Ferry County District Court on Dec. 20. If convicted, there is a maximum penalty of one year in jail, a \$5,000 fine or both.</p> <p>The court documents were provided to The Spokesman-Review by the environmental advocacy groups Washington Wildlife First and the Kettle Range Conservation Group. According to the document, Hoenes “on or about” Nov. 13 illegally killed an animal in Ferry County.</p> <p>What kind of animal, what kind of weapon used and a more detailed explanation of what happened were not included in the document.</p> <p>“Yes, I self-reported the incident immediately after I realized I made the mistake and cooperated fully during the investigation,” Hoenes wrote in an email to The Spokesman-Review. “Due to the active judicial process underway, I can’t comment further at this time.”</p> <p>A spokesman for the WDFW declined to comment and referred questions to the Ferry County Prosecutor’s Office. The prosecutor’s office referred questions to the investigatory agency, which in this case was WDFW’s enforcement division.</p> <p>“To have someone in a management position that is a poacher without any sort of disciplinary action is beyond hypocritical,” said Samantha Bruegger, the executive director of Washington Wildlife First. “It’s irresponsible.”</p> <p>Washington Wildlife First is a newly formed advocacy group aimed at reforming WDFW, alleging that state agencies often “prioritize reckless consumption over responsible conservation.” The Kettle Range Conservation Group is a longstanding environmental organization based in Ferry County.</p> <p>Ferry County is in Game Management Unit 101. Per 2021 hunting regulations, a late archery general whitetail deer season ran from Nov. 10 to Dec. 15. The elk modern firearm season for the area ran from</p>

	Oct. 30 to Nov. 7 and a late archery general elk season ran from Nov. 25 to Dec. 8. A cougar hunting season ran from Sept. 1 to Dec. 31.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Virginia Beach police forged documents
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/01/12/virginia-beach-police-forged-documents/
GIST	<p>Police in Virginia Beach repeatedly used forged documents purporting to be from the state Department of Forensic Science during interrogations, falsely allowing suspects to believe DNA or other forensic evidence had tied them to a crime, the state attorney general revealed Wednesday in announcing an agreement to ban the practice.</p> <p>“This was an extremely troubling and potentially unconstitutional tactic that abused the name of the Commonwealth to try to coerce confessions,” Attorney General Mark R. Herring (D) said in a statement. “It also abused the good name and reputation of the Commonwealth’s hard-working forensic scientists and professionals who work hard to provide accurate, solid evidence in support of our law enforcement agencies.”</p> <p>The Virginia Beach Police Department said in a statement that the technique, “though legal, was not in the spirit of what the community expects.” The department said it stopped employing the tactic before it learned of the attorney general’s investigation.</p> <p>Officials said the practice was discovered in April 2021, when an assistant commonwealth’s attorney asked the Virginia Department of Forensic Science for a certified copy of a report that turned out not to exist. Police Chief Paul Neudigate was notified and immediately moved to prohibit the use of inauthentic documents in a May 1 directive. Reviewing thousands of cases, the department found five instances between March 2016 and February 2020 where fake DFS records were used in interrogations. The attorney general’s office opened its own investigation and this week confirmed those findings.</p> <p>One of those forged documents was presented in a bail hearing as evidence, Herring said.</p> <p>The police have entered into a two-year “conciliation agreement” with the attorney general’s office, committing to uphold the policy barring forged documents and report any violations.</p> <p>Police are allowed to lie in interrogations as long as those falsehoods don’t render a confession involuntary by overbearing a suspect’s will. The Supreme Court has ruled that falsely telling a suspect that his fingerprints were found at the scene of a crime did not meet that standard. In 1997, an appeals court in Virginia upheld a murder conviction involving forged DNA and fingerprint reports.</p> <p>“Unfortunately, courts, including in Virginia, have held that falsehoods by police in obtaining an alleged confession, even the use of forged documents, does not necessarily invalidate a confession,” defense attorney Chris Leibig said. “Such ploys are just a factor to be considered in whether a confession was voluntary. Reprehensible does not equal unconstitutional.”</p> <p>Some state courts have explicitly barred the use of fabricated evidence in interrogations, in part for fear that the fake documents would end up being used in court or otherwise disseminated publicly.</p> <p>It “brings to mind the horrors of less advanced centuries in our civilization when magistrates at times schemed with sovereigns to frame political rivals,” a New Jersey appeals court ruled in 2003. “We view the police conduct to be so inappropriate that it cannot be tolerated or withstand scrutiny under any constitutional or common-law principles.”</p> <p>This is the second time Herring’s office has wielded his authority under a 2020 law prohibiting “a pattern or practice of conduct by law-enforcement officers” that violates civil rights. The first came in December, when the attorney general sued the town of Windsor for alleged racial discrimination in police stops and searches.</p>

HEADLINE	01/12 Charge: banned substances to Olympians
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/olympics/2022/01/12/eric-lira-blessing-okagbare/
GIST	<p>Federal prosecutors charged a Texas man with peddling performance-enhancing drugs to elite athletes in advance of last year's Tokyo Olympics, according to a criminal complaint unsealed Wednesday in U.S. District Court in Manhattan.</p> <p>The complaint alleges Eric Lira, a self-proclaimed "kinesiologist and naturopathic" therapist, provided banned substances including human growth hormone and erythropoietin, or EPO, to the athletes. Lira, 41, is the proprietor of Med Sport LLC, an El Paso company. According to a LinkedIn profile, he has operated in Texas and Juárez, Mexico, which borders El Paso. It is not clear whether Lira has a lawyer, and he did not immediately respond to a phone message seeking comment.</p> <p>The court records suggest among his alleged clients was a Nigerian sprinter who was banned from the Tokyo Games after testing positive for human growth hormone. Prosecutors said in a news release that Lira was the first person charged under federal anti-doping statutes giving American authorities global reach to indict synthetic cheaters in major sporting events. The Rodchenkov Anti-Doping Act, named after the whistleblower in the Russian state-sponsored doping scandal, was signed into law in 2020.</p> <p>Travis Tygart, CEO of the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, which was consulted during the investigation, said in a statement that Lira's indictment was a "wonderful example of the power of whistleblowers coming forward to trusted anti-doping agencies and law enforcement to ensure the protection of the Olympic Games."</p> <p>According to the complaint, the investigation began in July, weeks before the start of the pandemic-delayed Tokyo Games, when a subject referred to as "Individual-1" found packages of vials of apparent PEDs, including human growth hormone, in an athlete's Florida home and provided photos of the drugs to the FBI. The packages included Mexican drugs bearing Lira's return address that apparently had been mailed to an Olympian referred to in the records only as "Athlete-1."</p> <p>In the days before the Tokyo Games, according to the complaint, that athlete tested positive for human growth hormone. Though the court documents do not identify Lira's alleged clients, the details in the complaint concerning "Athlete-1" match the circumstances of Nigerian sprinter Blessing Okagbare. She was suspended during the Games and ultimately received a multiyear ban. Okagbare did not immediately respond to an email seeking comment.</p> <p>As Okagbare returned to the United States, according to the complaint, her phone was searched by American border officials and an FBI agent. The complaint cited phone communications in which she allegedly arranged for Lira to supply her and a male athlete, referred to only as "Athlete-2," with drugs she referred to as "honey," for human growth hormone, and "epo," for "blood-building" drug erythropoietin.</p> <p>"Hey Eric, I just sent you \$2,500, can you confirm it via Zelle?" one of the alleged messages read. "And also, remember I told you [Athlete-2] had hurt his hamstring, so anything that will help the hamstring really heal fast you can actually bring it as well, ok?"</p> <p>Okagbare appeared pleased with the results, allegedly writing to Lira: "Hola amigo / Eric my body feel so good / I just ran 10.63 in the 100m on Friday / with a 2.7 wind / I am sooooo happy / Ericccccccc / Whatever you did, is working so well."</p> <p>"What you did . . . is going to help you for the upcoming events," Lira wrote to Okagbare on July 19, when she was training in Slovakia before departing for Tokyo. "You are doing your part and you will be ready to dominate."</p>

	<p>That day, though, a blood collection resulted in her positive test for human growth hormone. “Call me urgently,” Okagbare messaged Lira, according to the complaint. “They said one of my result came out positive on HGH... I don’t understand.”</p> <p>Though Okagbare referred to Lira as a “doctor,” according to the complaint, the FBI found he is not licensed to practice medicine in any of the states where he allegedly operated. A special agent noted in the criminal complaint that Lira’s self-described specialty as a “naturopathic” therapist refers to unlicensed physicians who “diagnose, prevent, and treat acute and chronic illness to restore and establish optimal health by supporting the person’s inherent self-healing process.”</p> <p>In 2021, Lira’s company received \$23,800 from the Paycheck Protection Program, according to a ProPublica database tracking coronavirus relief.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	01/12 Oregon alarm at rise illegal pot farms
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/12/oregon-marijuana-illegal-farms-environment
GIST	<p>Christopher Hall parks his old Toyota on a dirt road that dead-ends in a forest in Oregon’s Illinois Valley. He points out a cluster of greenhouses surrounded by piles of trash, and the hillside above, which has been terraced and entirely stripped of vegetation. Guard dogs run through a small clearing, barking at us.</p> <p>Two men pull up almost instantly in a Honda with busted headlights; the driver asks Hall what he’s doing there. For a bespectacled middle-aged conservationist, Hall is surprisingly reckless. Even though he can see the men are armed, he yells back at them: “Where are you from? We know what you’re doing here is illegal! How many plants are you growing?” One man says they’re from Serbia and claims they have a license to grow as another truck pulls up.</p> <p>I tell Hall I think we should move on, and he reluctantly shifts into drive but is unable to resist a few parting shots: “Do you think you can just keep trashing our streams? Have some respect for the land!”</p> <p>This part of south-western Oregon – which encompasses Josephine, Jackson and Douglas counties and was settled by goldminers in the 1850s – has always kept a touch of the wild west anti-authority streak, contributing to its status as a stronghold of illegal cannabis farms since the 1960s.</p> <p>Pot was legalized for recreational use in Oregon in 2015, making it legal for any person to grow up to four plants. But in the past year, longtime locals have been alarmed by the rapid proliferation of unlicensed pot farms, unprecedented in terms of size and allegedly controlled by crime syndicates from eastern Europe, China and Mexico.</p> <p>Hall, community liaison for the Illinois Valley Soil and Water Conservation District, has been flying over the region in a single-engine plane to map illegal pot farms and has pinpointed 1,030 clusters of greenhouses on just 20 miles of the valley, 80% of which he estimates are illegal. Local authorities agree with that estimate. These large grows have flooded the market – a pound of cannabis that was worth \$3,000 in 2009 here might now fetch \$400, all but killing the industry for small-time legal growers.</p> <p>County officials say they have been inundated by hundreds of complaints from locals who accuse “crime syndicates” of stealing their farm equipment and their water. Hall documents the impact of the illegal farms depleting aquifers by pumping from protected rivers and digging huge pits to tap into the groundwater. “It takes an act of God to get a water right in Oregon, so they just don’t bother. They just dig holes,” he says. “One of the biggest complaints this year is that people’s wells are underperforming or just drying right out,” he says. “The threat to the environmental health of the region cannot be overstated. The community is upside down.”</p> <p>Jackson and Douglas counties declared a state of emergency in October and asked Governor Kate Brown for state funding for more enforcement personnel because local authorities are overwhelmed. This request is not unprecedented. The national guard have participated in pot raids since 1989, when Operation Green Sweep descended on the nearby Emerald Triangle, California’s most prolific weed region, the tip of which</p>

touches southern Oregon. Those raiders saw 1,300 cannabis plants destroyed, and locals protested against that deployment of federal troops to small farms. In 2019, government raids [destroyed 953,459 plants](#) in California. It's the same story in Oregon, where busts on large grows now yield tens of thousands of plants.

"When I say cartels, I'm not talking just Hispanic," says the Josephine county sheriff, Dave Daniel, who welcomes the idea of state and federal help. "I'm talking Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Chinese, east coast drug trafficking organizations."

Daniel, who has been sheriff since 2015, is a big man with close-cropped silver hair. "The 2021 grow season was the most brazen, in your face, wide open that I've seen yet," he says. He describes farms where crews of migrant workers live under armed guard, without refrigeration or sanitation. "They rule by fear of injury and death. They human-traffic. We know that," he says of the cartels.

With a team of just three detectives, Daniel doesn't have the manpower to properly tackle the problem. "Have you ever seen the movie Animal House?" he asks. "Kevin Bacon is in his little police or military uniform and he's got his hands in the air and he says 'Remain calm, all is well' and then completely gets mowed over by the crowd? That's me. That's Josephine county law enforcement right there."

A big part of the problem is rooted in the legalization of industrial hemp, which looks and smells like marijuana but won't get you high. Since 2010, it's been legal to grow hemp in unlimited quantities. After the hemp market crashed in 2018, some farmers began hiding psychoactive cannabis plants in their hemp fields and many more leased their properties to out-of-state operators who claimed they planned on growing hemp.

This ruse allows criminal organizations to grow on a vast scale. Douglas county law enforcement [recently raided two supposed hemp farms they believe are operated by the same cartel](#) and seized a total of 122,000 cannabis plants – nearly 50 times the quantity of plants that can typically be grown under a recreational cannabis license. In another Douglas county raid this November, police [seized 500,000 pounds](#) of weed, which they estimate is worth \$500m.

Although Governor Brown declined to send in the national guard this harvest season, which ended mid-November, Daniel hopes he will have the state's support next year.

"We're in close contact with the governor and our federal partners are starting to open their eyes. I've talked to the FBI, and the DEA. And everyone is going, 'Something's not right in southern Oregon.'"

Communities here used to be close-knit. Unlicensed pot farms abounded, but the growers were largely local people and thus had some sense of accountability to one another and the environment.

Nicole Rensenbrink, a social worker who is married to the local veterinarian, has lived in Josephine county since 1983 and laments how much it has changed in recent years, describing "the endless ugliness that the huge influx of cannabis farms has brought to our valley". She says their once-picturesque drive to work is "riddled with ugly plastic hoop houses, fencing and industrial-looking buildings," – all the makings for large-scale pot grows. She has to keep her dogs away from the creek that runs through her property because it's full of "nasty looking slime"; she blames fertilizer run-off from the unregulated farms.

Tim Freeman, a Douglas county commissioner, says for some locals the issue goes beyond dismay over a changing landscape. "When residents call in, they are scared," Freeman says. "They are scared about where they live, afraid of what's going on around them and, in many cases, they are afraid to leave their homes."

Terra and Jerry Palmer live in a shingled one-room cabin that Jerry built 30 years ago. The couple were saving up to build a bigger house on their land, but are considering moving because of an illegal grow that moved in nearby last year. Terra describes constant traffic on their country road, a steady stream of "pickup trucks full of young men", cars without license plates, and trucks full of cannabis. Hundreds of

trees Jerry planted over the years have started to die off due to a lack of water.

“I’m really discouraged because this year the creek went dry two months earlier than it’s ever gone dry during the all years that I’ve been here,” Jerry says.

The couple have not confronted their neighbors. They fear reprisals and asked that their names be changed.

Terra and Jerry may look like typical older hippies, but they come off as conventional when discussing the consequences for breaking the law on such a large scale. “Confiscate the property and jail landowners who knowingly lease land to illegal growers. Deport illegal migrant workers,” Terra wrote in a letter beseeching authorities to take action.

A migrant, mostly undocumented, workforce is required to farm on the scale southern Oregon is dealing with now. Sheriff Daniel is less aggressive on the subject of those workers. “We don’t look into immigration status. State law doesn’t allow us to,” he says. “Which is fine. I treat these workers like they’re victims, to be honest with you. Which I think in large part they are.”

Kathy Keesee-Morales is the program coordinator for the Unete Center for Farm Worker Advocacy, an organization that lobbies for worker rights and provides support to the migrant community. Bosses withholding pay and substandard living conditions are the most prominent issues her organization has to address in relation to cannabis farms.

“There were some pretty extreme cases. There’s farms where there were young children living in what someone referred to as squalor. They were sleeping under black plastic tarps inside the hoop houses,” she says.

About half of the 200 complaints of wage withholding they received in 2021 are from workers who have been abused, like the man who said when he tried to leave the farm his boss put a gun to his head and threatened his family.

Large pot farms with armed bosses aren’t where most of the migrant workers planned to end up. But last year, wildfires swept through the region, immolating the nearby towns of Phoenix and Talent. This year was so dry the governor had declared a state of drought emergency by June. “So these farm workers that were depending on harvesting the orchards and the grapes to be able to survive – literally survive over the summer and save up money for the winter – they didn’t have anywhere to go except to work for these [cannabis] farms,” Morales says.

The threat of violence isn’t limited to workers. “I’ve had a homeowner who leased out his property, but then he realized it wasn’t actually just a hemp grow,” says Sheriff Daniel. “He started questioning one of the soldiers – managers, soldiers, whatever you want to call it – and they threatened to burn his house down. They said, ‘We can take care of this real quick. One match. So mind your own business.’”

The abuse of workers, environmental degradation and threats of violence towards locals have pushed some residents who have historically been skeptical of federal drug enforcement to ask for exactly that. Cedar Grey and his wife, Madrone, own Siskiyow Sungrown, a seven-year-old permitted cannabis farm with 5,000 plants, which is large for a legal operation. But he has been growing cannabis in this area since 1998, the year Oregon legalized marijuana for medical use.

“Our local government seems to spend more time enforcing compliance on legal cannabis farms than even visiting illegal cannabis farms,” Cedar says. “That’s incredibly frustrating to legal cannabis farms. The amount of money we spend and the hoops that we jump through to be compliant with regulations – it’s mountainous, it’s unbelievable,” Cedar says.

To ensure licensed cannabis farms aren’t selling on the illicit market, Oregon law requires that farmers document every scrap of plant material they grow – from seed to sale. Growers are responsible for tagging and tracking every single plant. And all work must be done on camera – even the farm’s compost piles are

under surveillance. If they snip a leaf from a branch, they have to weigh the clipping and report it to the Oregon Liquor and [Cannabis](#) Commission, the organization that strictly monitors all legal pot farms. Grey estimates he has spent \$150,000 for cameras, video, alarms and tracking systems in the last seven years.

“I mean it’s really, really strange for me to be calling for a huge law enforcement or military crackdown on growing marijuana because for so long I just wanted it to be free for people to grow,” Cedar says. “But what’s happening here has to stop. It’s too bad, it’s too wrong, and it’s too damaging. I fully support federal resources being brought, Oregon national guard and federal law enforcement coming in. Hit every one of these farms.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 Lawsuit against Prince Andrew upheld
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/12/nyregion/prince-andrew-epstein-lawsuit-virginia-giuffre.html
GIST	<p>A lawsuit against Prince Andrew brought by Virginia Giuffre, a woman who claimed he raped her when she was a teenager, will be allowed to proceed after a federal judge in Manhattan denied Andrew’s request to dismiss the suit.</p> <p>Andrew, 61, the second son of Queen Elizabeth II and a friend of the financier and convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, argued in court papers that he had been released from liability in future lawsuits under the terms of a settlement Ms. Giuffre reached with Mr. Epstein in 2009 in a different lawsuit, in Florida.</p> <p>Mr. Epstein, 66, was found hanged in a Manhattan jail cell in 2019 while awaiting a sex-trafficking trial. His death was ruled a suicide.</p> <p>In the Florida case, Mr. Epstein paid Ms. Giuffre \$500,000 to settle a lawsuit in which she had accused Mr. Epstein of sexually abusing her when she was a teenager, according to the settlement agreement, which was unsealed this month.</p> <p>Under the terms of the agreement, Ms. Giuffre had released Mr. Epstein and other “potential defendants” from further litigation, a category that lawyers for Prince Andrew said included him.</p> <p>In rejecting Andrew’s argument and allowing Ms. Giuffre’s lawsuit to continue, the judge, Lewis A. Kaplan of Federal District Court, did not address the merits of Ms. Giuffre’s claims.</p> <p>Andrew, who has denied Ms. Giuffre’s allegations, has not been charged with any crimes. His name surfaced intermittently in testimony at the recent sex-trafficking trial in Manhattan of Ghislaine Maxwell, Mr. Epstein’s longtime companion, who was convicted of five of the six counts against her. Witnesses testified that Andrew was a friend of Ms. Maxwell and had flown on some of Mr. Epstein’s planes.</p> <p>Under an agreed-upon scheduling order in the lawsuit, lawyers for Ms. Giuffre and Andrew must complete legal discovery — the exchange of documents and the taking of depositions of experts — by July 14.</p> <p>Judge Kaplan’s ruling, which was made public on Wednesday, comes as the Queen prepares to mark 70 years on the throne in February, and appears to assure that the lawsuit and any potentially damaging disclosures could continue to cast a shadow over the royal family.</p> <p>A lawyer for Andrew, the Duke of York, did not respond to a request for comment. Buckingham Palace declined to comment on the ruling.</p> <p>Ms. Giuffre’s lawyer, David Boies, said his client was pleased that Andrew’s motion to dismiss had been denied, “and that evidence will now be taken concerning her claims against him.”</p> <p>“She looks forward to a judicial determination of the merits of those claims,” Mr. Boies said.</p>

	<p>In her suit, filed in August, Ms. Giuffre claimed that Andrew sexually abused her when she was younger than 18 at Mr. Epstein's mansion in Manhattan and on his private island, Little St. James, in the U.S. Virgin Islands.</p> <p>Andrew, along with Mr. Epstein and Ms. Maxwell, also forced her to have sexual intercourse with Andrew against her will at Ms. Maxwell's home in London, the lawsuit said.</p> <p>The lawsuit said Ms. Giuffre was compelled by Mr. Epstein, Ms. Maxwell and Andrew to engage in sexual acts with Andrew, and that she feared repercussions if she disobeyed because of "their powerful connections, wealth and authority."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Waukesha parade suspect 71 new charges
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/waukesha-parade-darrell-brooks-charges/
GIST	<p>The man who allegedly drove an SUV into a Wisconsin parade last year was charged with 71 new counts on Wednesday, according to an amended criminal complaint obtained by CBS affiliate WDJT. Darrell Brooks now faces a total of 77 charges in the incident that left six people dead and dozens more injured.</p> <p>The charges include six counts of first-degree intentional homicide, 61 counts of first-degree recklessly endangering safety and six counts of hit and run involving death. He also faces two domestic abuse charges, which are classified as misdemeanors, and two bail-jumping felony counts.</p> <p>On November 21, Brooks allegedly intentionally plowed a red SUV into a holiday parade in Waukesha. Six people were killed. The medical examiner found that five victims died of multiple blunt force injuries, and the sixth, a child, died of "Craniocerebral Injuries from blunt force trauma to the head," the complaint said. More than 60 people were injured, including at least 18 children, authorities said. The severity of their injuries varied.</p> <p>According to the complaint, Brooks hit people from eight different groups participating in the parade, as well as spectators, in a 5-block span.</p> <p>An inspection into the vehicle found all necessary functions to be fully operating at the time of the incident, according to the complaint. A detective said at times, Brooks, who appeared to have "no emotion on his face," drove with his head leaned out of the window because there were bodies on the windshield blocking his view.</p> <p>"At no time did Brooks, as the operator of the SUV involved in the multiple collisions, make any reasonable effort to investigate what was struck, and that he failed to stop the vehicle as close to the scene of the accident as possible, and did not remain at the scene of the accident," the complaint states.</p> <p>According to court records, Brooks has a long criminal history, including an incident in which he allegedly ran over his child's mother with the same vehicle he drove through the parade. Police said that moments before the parade, Brooks had left the scene of a domestic dispute.</p> <p>He is being held on a \$5 million bond.</p> <p>The FBI and local authorities are continuing to investigate the incident.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/13 German court convicts Syrian for torture
SOURCE	https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/german-court-syria-guilty-crimes-humanity-landmark-torture-trial-rcna12046
GIST	A German court on Thursday convicted a former Syrian secret police officer of crimes against humanity for overseeing the abuse of detainees at a jail near Damascus a decade ago.

The verdict in the landmark trial has been keenly anticipated by Syrians who suffered abuse or lost relatives at the hands of [President Bashar al-Assad's government](#) in the country's [long-running conflict](#).

The Koblenz state court concluded that Anwar Raslan was the senior officer in charge of a facility in the Syrian city of Douma known as Al Khatib, or Branch 251, where suspected opposition protesters were detained.

The court sentenced him to life in prison. His lawyers asked judges last week to acquit their client, claiming that he never personally tortured anybody and that he defected in late 2012.

German prosecutors alleged that Raslan supervised the “systematic and brutal torture” of more than 4,000 prisoners between April 2011 and September 2012, resulting in the deaths of dozens of people.

A junior officer, Eyad al-Gharib, was convicted last year of accessory to crimes against humanity and sentenced by the Koblenz court to 4½ years in prison.

Both men were arrested in Germany in 2019, years after seeking asylum in the country.

Victims and human rights groups have said they hope the verdict will be a first step toward justice for countless people who have been unable to file criminal complaints against officials in Syria or before the International Criminal Court.

Since Russia and China have blocked efforts for the U.N. Security Council to refer cases to The Hague-based tribunal, countries such as Germany that apply the principle of universal jurisdiction for serious crimes will increasingly become the venue for such trials, experts say.

“We are starting to see the fruits of a determined push by courageous survivors, activists and others to achieve justice for horrific atrocities in Syria’s network of prisons,” said Balkees Jarrah, associate international justice director at Human Rights Watch.

“The verdict is a breakthrough for Syrian victims and the German justice system in cracking the wall of impunity,” she added. “Other countries should follow Germany’s lead and actively bolster efforts to prosecute serious crimes in Syria.”

The trial is the first of its kind worldwide and other courts may cite the verdict and evidence heard in Koblenz, said Patrick Kroker, a lawyer with the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights. The group represented several victims who under German law were able to take part in the proceedings as co-plaintiffs.

A key part of the evidence against Raslan were the photographs of alleged torture victims smuggled out of Syria by a former police officer, who goes by the alias of Caesar.

Conservative estimates put the number of those detained or forcibly disappeared in Syria at 149,000, more than 85 percent of them at the hands of the Syrian government, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights. Most disappeared or were detained soon after peaceful protests erupted in March 2011 against al-Assad’s government, which responded to the rallies with a brutal crackdown.

The Syrian government denies it is holding any political prisoners, labeling its opposition terrorists. After battlefield wins, it has negotiated limited prisoner exchanges with various armed groups, which families say offer partial solutions for a very small number of people.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/12 Suspect held; 2012 slayings in French Alps
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/suspect-detained-2012-slayings-french-alps-82219793

GIST	<p>PARIS -- A suspect in the 2012 slayings of a British-Iraqi family vacationing in the French Alps and a cyclist has been detained, a French prosecutor said Wednesday.</p> <p>Saad al-Hilli, his wife Ikbal and his mother-in-law Souhaila al-Allaf were shot dead on a remote mountain road near Annecy in eastern France. French cyclist Sylvain Mollier was also killed in the shooting. Al-Hilli's two young daughters, who were in the car at the time of the shooting, survived the attack.</p> <p>Prosecutor Line Bonnet tweeted that a person has been placed in police custody in the Chambéry region "in connection with the investigation into the murders of the al-Hilli family and Sylvain Mollier, known as the 'Chevaline events' of Sept. 5, 2012."</p> <p>She didn't give further details on the case because the investigation is ongoing.</p> <p>French investigators have previously questioned persons of interest in the killings but nine years into the probe no charges have been filed in the case.</p> <p>The al-Hilli children, aged 4 and 7 at the time, were the only witnesses to the macabre killings that have puzzled French investigators. The case has international ramifications with links tying the slain family to Britain, Iraq, Sweden and Spain.</p> <p>In 2015, the prosecutor found no evidence to implicate a French motorcyclist that had been questioned by police in Annecy after British police issued a sketch of a motorcyclist seen near the crime scene.</p> <p>The four victims and the two young survivors were discovered by police in a wooded area on an isolated mountain road from the village of Chevaline, near bucolic Lake Annecy in eastern France.</p> <p>Eric Maillaud, the prosecutor in Annecy in 2012 said the 4-year-old girl who survived the shootings could not help their investigation because she was hiding under her mother's legs during the killings. She was found inside the car about eight hours after the shootings.</p> <p>Her 7-year-old sister, who was shot in the shoulder and survived, was found bloodied and battered outside the vehicle, a BMW station wagon in which three of the bodies were found.</p> <p>The prosecutor has said 25 gun cartridges that were found inside the family vehicle. All those killed were found with at least three bullet wounds, each with one single shot to the head.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	01/12 Fatal police shootings dip in 2021; trend?
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/fatal-police-shootings-dip-2021-amid-calls-reform/story?id=81914364
GIST	<p>The Orlando Police Department created a new unit in 2021 that sends behavioral health experts instead of law enforcement officers to respond to 911 calls for mental health crises.</p> <p>It's in an effort -- one of a number around the country -- to avoid confrontations with law enforcement responding to non-violent calls and potentially avoidable fatal police shootings. More than 20% of people fatally shot by police since 2015 had mental illness, according to the Washington Post's "Fatal Force" database.</p> <p>Initiatives like these to address community concerns about policing have been ongoing for years but picked up renewed momentum in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the nationwide protests that followed.</p> <p>Fatal police shootings have been a stubborn and increasingly visible flash point for tensions between communities and police, and the racial dynamics that underpin them, thanks in part to a proliferation of bystander video and police body camera footage.</p> <p>But experts say there are some glimmers of hope -- early indications that a shift may be taking place.</p>

With greater attention being paid to police-community relations, de-escalation training and diversity in the ranks, there were 888 fatal police shootings nationwide in 2021 -- down 133 from 1,021 in 2020, according to data from [the Washington Post's database](#).

That's a decrease of 13% year-over-year. The lowest number of fatal shootings in a full calendar year in the database, which stretches back to 2015, is 957 in 2016 and the average is about 991.

There is no comprehensive nationwide database of police use of force, though the [FBI has been attempting to build one](#) for years, so it is [difficult to get an overall sense of how often police use their weapons](#).

Instead, private organizations have led the charge in compiling a more complete set of data.

The Washington Post, as well as Mapping Police Violence and the Gun Violence Archive, track and verify police-involved shooting deaths based on a collection of news accounts, social media postings and police reports.

Mapping Police Violence also reports a small decrease in the number of shooting deaths attributed to police, but says the 2021 fatal shooting totals are "similar" to those of years past.

Lowest numbers in 6 years for some states

There is notable variation, however, in the number of fatal police shootings on a state level where many states experienced a drop, according to the Washington Post database.

From 2020 to 2021, Florida saw the largest numeric drop in deadly police shootings, from 93 to 44, followed by decreases in California and Washington, according to the Washington Post data.

While some states saw declines, others saw increases. Illinois saw 10 more fatal police shootings in 2021, Mississippi experienced a rise of eight and New Mexico, Georgia, Nebraska and Idaho had six more shootings.

Some experts caution that a one-year decline doesn't tell us very much and a decline in the number of police interactions may be a factor (arrests, for instance, declined dramatically from 2019 to 2020, the most recent year for which FBI data is available.)

Police violence has been on the rise since the 1980s, according to [University of Washington research](#) that has been published in the Lancet. The research compiled independent and federal data in an attempt to get a full picture of police killings in the U.S.

However, other police reform experts interviewed by ABC News are cautiously optimistic about a potential inflection point in police use of force.

They say the call for accountability from protesters and leaders may be behind this apparent change, including what could be an increased conscientiousness on the part of officers in what otherwise may have become deadly altercations.

"We've seen the power of protesting in reshaping the public consciousness," said Howard Henderson, the director of the Center for Justice Research at Texas Southern University. "We've been able to see the role of protesting and making sure that the policymakers recognize the concerns of the constituents."

In Orlando, where the department has been working to change community policing, there were [five fatal police shootings in 2020](#). In 2021, there was one. The numbers, though small, are significant, the department says, in highlighting the impact of efforts made to address community criticisms of police and reduce violence.

"The Orlando Police Department is dedicated to protecting our residents, visitors, and businesses," an OPD spokesperson said in a statement about the drop in fatal police shootings and the efforts to improve policing. OPD has averaged 3.3 fatal shootings a year since 2015, the data shows.

"We are fully committed to listening to our community's concerns and to engaging in conversations that will yield a path to positive and long-lasting relationships with our community members," the statement read.

Tools for change

OPD's Community Response Team launched in March 2021, but it has already answered 827 calls, assisted 815 people, and helped more than 300 of them access mental health treatment, according to Capt. Lovetta Quinn-Henry, who oversees the program.

Black men, Quinn-Henry said, make up the largest demographic of users.

"I'm just super proud that our agency has taken the first step to be one of the leading agencies to look at an alternative response to police for individuals in a mental health crisis," Quinn-Henry said.

With these calls, she says responders focus on de-escalating situations, helping people in distress and connecting them with their needed treatment, support and resources.

This effort has reduced referrals to the criminal justice system for distressed individuals, decreased potential for violent interactions and lessens the burden of work on law enforcement officers, Quinn-Henry said.

Some of the seemingly minor mental health-related calls that this team responds to have the potential to escalate into police shootings when law enforcement is involved.

"We really weren't servicing the individual [before]," Quinn-Henry added. "Having this alternative response gives us a little bit more opportunity to connect them to services. So, now the officers aren't having those repeat calls. And we get them at the initial crisis level and prevent them from getting to that very acute aggressive level."

This idea isn't completely new: This kind of model has effectively been implemented in Oregon, Colorado, Washington and more.

Another initiative replicated across the country is OPD's citizen review board.

Orlando, like many other cities, established a citizen review board -- an independent citizen-run oversight committee -- about 10 years ago, to address concerns with local policing.

But board member Tom Keen said that after Floyd's death and the movement against police use-of-force that followed, CRB meetings went from having just a few participants to having dozens. Community engagement increased dramatically, Keen said, offering citizens and police more insight into civilian relations with the police.

"We can't take our eye off the ball," Keen said. "We have to stay focused on making sure that our police department is well-trained and that they are serving the community and that's one of the jobs of the board."

Some community members have said they wish the board had more say in the investigative and punitive efforts in cases of abuse of power and use of force, but for now, Keen said, the board has been a valuable venue for citizens to speak directly with law enforcement to voice and plan a way to address concerns.

"We're one of many voices for change and we've been fortunate that we've had very good leadership with both the mayor and with our current police chief," Keen said.

OPD is also implementing a Response to Resistance policy that outlines a new use-of-force framework that is intended to mitigate the potential for excessive force. A recent independent review of the department by [the police accountability research organization The Bowman Group](#) is helping the agency fix its "very weak policy system."

The power of protest

Millions have taken to the streets around the world since Floyd's murder by former Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin.

"I think people are conscientious over what looks like a disconnect between the police and, particularly, communities of color," said James E. Wright II, an assistant professor at Florida State University.

"Police officers are more conscientious of their actions now," he added. "They understand they don't want to end up on the six o'clock news. If they're conscientious of this behavior, they're also conscientious of when they're negligent."

ABC News contributor and former NYPD Chief of Detectives Robert Boyce said that the protests are likely to have had a large impact on how officers engage with and police communities.

"What happens across the country, due to the 24-hour news cycle, affects everywhere in the country," Boyce said in an interview. "If we had strong federal leadership on this, we would be able to have national standards in law enforcement where you wouldn't have these [abuse of force] behaviors."

Local leaders have also started to answer the demands of the public in several ways, according to Henderson.

Since Floyd's death in May 2020, at least 3,428 state bills or executive actions on policing have been introduced, according to the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#), which tracks state-based law enforcement legislation.

There has also been a rise in protocol changes that reduce the potential for confrontation or incarceration, like ending the enforcement of minor traffic violations or decriminalizing marijuana.

And there has also been a push to implement alternative policing units, civilian review boards, and beef up use-of-force and de-escalation training.

However, some researchers say a single-year push for reform and a drop in shootings isn't enough to signal progress. Experts say the real test of how much impact these new tools are having remains to be seen in the years to come.

"Research shows that since 1980, 17,000 killings by police have gone uncounted," Henderson said, citing the [University of Washington report](#). "In order to adequately deal with it, you've got to know the extent to which it exists."

Secondly, he emphasized decreasing unnecessary interactions between the police and the community.

"There's just way too much interaction that we don't necessarily need to have being responded to by police officers," he said.

Lastly, Henderson also said the "qualified immunity" of police officers may also be a sticking point in the path against reducing police use-of-force. Qualified immunity means that officers are protected from many civil lawsuits for their conduct while on duty if it "does not violate clearly established statutory or constitutional rights of which a reasonable person would have known," according [to the FBI](#).

The recent efforts and the progress being made can't be ignored though, Wright said.

	"Moving forward, [the trend] will hold up if people continue to put political pressure on their local officials as well as their local leaders to hold not just police officers, but public servants, accountable," Wright said.
Return to Top	

Information From Online Communities and Unclassified Sources/InFOCUS is a situational awareness report published daily by the Washington State Fusion Center.

If you no longer wish to receive this report, please submit an email to intake@wsfc.wa.gov and enter UNSUBSCRIBE InFOCUS in the Subject line.

DISCLAIMER - the articles highlighted within InFOCUS is for informational purposes only and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Washington State Fusion Center, the City of Seattle, the Seattle Police Department or the Washington State Patrol and have been included only for ease of reference and academic purposes.

FAIR USE Notice All rights to these copyrighted items are reserved. Articles and graphics have been placed within for educational and discussion purposes only, in compliance with 'Fair Use' criteria established in Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976. The principle of 'Fair Use' was established as law by Section 107 of The Copyright Act of 1976. 'Fair Use' legally eliminates the need to obtain permission or pay royalties for the use of previously copyrighted materials if the purposes of display include 'criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research.' Section 107 establishes four criteria for determining whether the use of a work in any particular case qualifies as a 'fair use'. A work used does not necessarily have to satisfy all four criteria to qualify as an instance of 'fair use'. Rather, 'fair use' is determined by the overall extent to which the cited work does or does not substantially satisfy the criteria in their totality. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes of your own that go beyond 'fair use,' you must obtain permission from the copyright owner. For more information go to: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml>

THIS DOCUMENT MAY CONTAIN COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL. COPYING AND DISSEMINATION IS PROHIBITED WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNERS.

Source: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml>

[Return to Top](#)